Nation-Building and Ethnicity[1]

There are many terms for defining human groups: they emerged in various societies with different histories and cultural traditions at different times. The meanings of these terms became more confused when they were translated into different languages. In English, there are terms to describe human groups such as "race," "tribe," "clan," "nation," "people," "country," "state," etc[2]. Compared with these terms, "ethnic group" and "ethnicity" only appeared recently in the 20th century (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975: 1).

These terms emerged in west Europe, the countries initiating the industrial revolution, then were introduced into other parts of the world accompanied by the western merchants, priests, and armies. These Europeans introduced their political and social systems as well as their ideology and values to other people by cultural influence or military force. "Nation-state" was the form of political entity first appearing in Western Europe, then adopted by colonies when they sought independence. "Nation" became an important term in international politics. "Nation-building" became a widespread political process among Asian, African and American countries, together with the powerful "nationalist" movement.

At the beginning of the 21st century, there were about 200 independent countries around the world that were recognized by the international society (the United Nations). An important phenomenon is that political boundaries have not always been drawn according to human group inhabitance but often, oppositely, have been affected by wars, treaties, and international powers. Therefore, there are many different human groups living in the same countries; populations originally from the same group now living on both sides of a boundary.

Many conflicts, wars, foreign interventions, separations and independence movements in today's world are directly or indirectly related to the distribution of human groups across boundaries. Do all these human groups seek political independence and build their own "countries"? Are there differences among these human groups in administrative identity and "national identity"? Is it possible to keep the current political structure in the world stable while making most human groups feel that their rights are respected and protected?

This article will discuss the terms "nation" and "ethnicity" and will try to clarify understanding of the terms in order to search for a framework to solve the issue of "nationalist separation."

I.   Diversity of Human Groupings and their Indigenous Terms

It should say that human beings emerged through the evolutionary process in many parts of the earth. There is no evidence that all human beings came from the same origin. To the contrary, archeological findings show the wide spreading of early human traces in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

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[2] There is also the term "caste" in India, and the term "lineage" among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1940: 4), as well as many other terms around the world.

These human groups were different from each other in biological characteristics, language, cultural tradition and forms of society.

When these different groups met each other, they all needed terms to call themselves (us) and the other groups (them, or A and B, if they referred to two other groups) to distinguish among them. The terms varied in their coverage and meanings under different circumstances or environments. The people on the Hawaiian Islands might have had some terms for small groups, because their total population size was small, and some characteristics (e.g., lineage or family) meaningful in the local context, while on the East Asian Plain such characteristics were ignored because of the larger population and the more significant differences existing among the large groups[3]. Therefore, there has been a pattern of diversity in the terms people use to distinguish among each other in different regions for a very long time before the world became smaller.

II. People's Group Identity is a Continuum at Different Levels

First, a person's image and identity about groups are not innate but learned from experiences after birth. Each different society has its own system of group identity. In some societies, family connection is more emphasized in identity, while in other societies geographic connection (place of origin) or religion is more emphasized.

It is easy to understand that a person's network has many levels: very close family members, relatives, lineage with the same surname, place of origin, province, nation, race, and finally human being. Which identity becomes the most important and significant is largely related to circumstances. A Mongolian herdsman thinks family and relatives are important when he stays in the grasslands; he thinks herdsmen are important characters compared with farmers when he visits a Mongolian village in the agricultural areas; he thinks being a Mongolian (ethnic identity) is important when he visits the city in Inner Mongolia where many Han work and reside; he thinks the identity of being from Inner Mongolia is important when he visits Beijing and meets Uygurs, Tibetans, and more Han people; and he thinks a Chinese citizen and a racial Asian is important when he visits the United States of America. These are samples of the identity levels. In other studies, a similar framework of "an articulating hierarchy of relational alterities" in identity analysis was discussed (Gladney, 1996: 455).

In the modern world, the most important group identity is country citizenship. This identity is associated with legal rights and responsibilities under the constitution of the country. In the very complicated process of nation-building in each country, many factors affect the final formation and geographic-population coverage of each nation. This is why there are many human groups who are transnational. To a certain extent, where the line of "national border" was drawn was determined by many factors, even by accident. Once the "border" was drawn, the system would run following its government's direction within the border and gradually the "border" would become significant not only administratively but economically and culturally as well. East Timor and Gibraltar are

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[3] One example in today's China is that the mainland government considers the indigenous people in Taiwan as "one group" and has named it the "Gaoshan nationality" (mountain people). Compared with Tibetans, Uygurs, and Mongolians, the differences among the different branches of this group are "minor". When some Chinese anthropologists moved to Taiwan and worked in research on Taiwan's indigenous peoples, they came to prefer distinguishing the "Gaoshan minority" into nine groups because within Taiwan these differences become meaningful with different references.

examples. Their people feel that they are different from those in Indonesia and Spain, after administration of a foreign government for years.

III. The Multi-group Entity was the Common Form in the Past and is at Present

When we look at the histories of the countries around the world, wars and conquests have made most old kingdoms and empires a combination of many different groups. In many cases, these kingdoms and empires included groups speaking different languages, having different life customs, sometimes even having different religious beliefs, as in the case of ancient China. The "nation-state" is just a phenomenon which appeared in modern history, beginning in Western Europe.

According to Anthony Smith, there are two models of "nations": one is "a civil model of the nation" in western Europe; another is "an ethnic model of the nation" in eastern Europe and Asia (Smith, 1991: 11). He suggests that "nation-state" or "a civil model of the nation" was a new phenomenon appearing in the 17th or 18th centuries, and not a universal form of political entity because there were multi-ethnic entities in China and India as well as other Asian countries.

In the period of industrialization and the development of international trade, capitalists in Western Europe wanted to build up their "national" markets and tax systems to protect their "domestic market," while expanding into the markets of other countries. Therefore, the big empires fell apart in the "nationalist movements." In the East, when the old empires (such as China) were threatened by Western imperialists and colonialists, all groups within the empire were forced to unite together to protect their common interests. In this process, the old country was organized into the new form it learned from the West, and this process actually became the process of "nation-rebuilding." In some cases, such as Indonesia, the colonies controlled many groups and its administration became the base of the nation-building for a new country (Anderson, 1983).

After the Second World War, large scale international labor migration following the labor shortages in Western Europe and the United States made these countries more multi-ethnic. The distribution of refugees and expansion of international enterprises also worked in the same direction. The multi-ethnic entity (independent country) has become a common phenomenon in today's world.

IV. The Framework of "Core-Periphery" has been Parallel to "Majority-Minority" Relations in Chinese History

China learned the term "nation" in the beginning of the last century from Europe. The Chinese have considered the world as a structure of "cultural core--periphery barbarians--remote civilizations." China is located in the center; Ancient Persia (Iran) and India are remote civilizations, where the Chinese learned Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. The Chinese emperors were the sons of the "Haven," to rule the central areas and to spread Chinese civilization among the periphery tribes while keeping communications with remote civilizations. Most dynasties of Chinese history, the emperors from Majority Han people, were conservative and defensive towards border tribes. When northern nomadic minorities (Mongolians and Manchurians) ruled China, they were relatively more aggressive. In general, when any periphery minority groups were strongly influenced by the Chinese civilization, they gradually integrated into "China" culturally and administratively.

Professor Fei Xiaotong suggested the term, "a pluralist unity of China," to describe the group relations in Chinese history (Fei, 1989).

In history, there is an administrative system of hierarchy that emerged from practice. The core part of the empire was the provinces directly under the emperor's court, whose officers were appointed by the emperor. The Han group formed the majority of the population in the provinces.

The second zone around the core was the areas where both the Han majority and other minorities lived. Some local officers might be selected from local minority groups.

The third zone was the peripheries where ethnic minorities were the majority of the local population. The authority of the central government was exercised through the hereditary chief and the nobles of the minority groups. These leaders could be removed by the emperor; they paid tax to the emperor and sent soldiers to the emperor's army, as was the case of the "Tu-si" system in southwestern China and the Chief of the Uygur tribes in Xinjiang.

The fourth zone was the places ruled by local governments under the hereditary chief of the minority group. The heritage through trans-generation or incarnation must have been approved by the emperor. Their administrative organization might take a form different from the central government and other provinces and their functions were under the supervision of officers of the central government. These leaders collected local taxes and send tributes to the emperor, such as the case of Tibet and Mongolia.

The fifth zone was the vassal states that sent tributes to China and accepted titles but actually ruled their countries independently, such as the case of Korea, Viet Nam and the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa) (Ma, 1998: 52). When these vassal states (Korea) faced invasion from other countries (Japan), they called upon China for help.

Therefore, there was a hierarchy, a "majority-minority" system. Besides the administrative relations, a very important factor in defining regions as a "core" or a "periphery" was the extent of their adaptation of Chinese culture. The situation for several "nations" with equal status only existed in the early history of China. That was the period of the Warring States (475-221 B.C.). After the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty unified China, the structure of the majority-minority groups was that of "pluralistic unity," and the central government considered itself the core of the civilization. This was why the Qing emperor refused to meet the representatives of Great Britain, because he did not consider China and Britain were "equal nations." The Opium War and other invasions taught China to change its attitude towards foreign nations while all groups under the Chinese administration were forced to unite to defend their common interest, and finally China became a nation in a modern form.

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the new government followed the Russian model to establish regional autonomy for ethnic minorities. In terms of translation, the government official term, "Min-Zu," has been translated into English as "Nationality." The ideas and movements for seeking group interests sometimes are translated as "Nationalism." These terms misled domestic and international understanding of the majority-minority relationship in China.

V. The Most Important Identity Today is the "Country (Nation) Identity," not the Ethnic Identity. The Most Important Order is Social Stability of the Current Countries (Nations)

When the terms "ethnic group" and "ethnicity" appeared, they mainly referred to the different

groups within countries. These groups might have different racial backgrounds, speak different languages and have different cultural traditions; in the case of immigration, they might have different places of origin. The examples are Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics in the United States. The term is also used in similar cases in European countries. May we use these terms in the multi-group countries on the other continents?

One general division can be suggested to define "domestic minorities" as "ethnic groups" regardless of their historical status. If this division can receive common agreement, it will certainly solve many problems and conflicts.

Compared with the group structure and relations in Western countries, the minority groups in China (Tibetans, Mongolians, Manchurians, Hui, Uygur, etc.) should be considered "ethnic minorities" like the racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics), not "nations" or "nationalities." They should enjoy all rights and responsibilities as citizens, and enjoy their cultural traditions and religious freedom. But they cannot establish political organizations to seek "separation" and "independence." The same opinion can be applied to any other countries. Muslims in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka, and Tajik in Afghanistan are "ethnic minorities" in these nations.

The "nation-building" process is completed when a nation is recognized by the international society whose legal forum is the United Nations. The principle of "self-determination" should not be in practice in today's world. All domestic minority groups are "ethnic groups," not "nations" or "nationalities." They are parts of the "pluralist unity" of their nation. The international society or any given country should not encourage any of these domestic ethnic minority groups to launch "nationalist separatism" and seek "independence." Of course, it is possible that one country might encourage an ethnic group to launch a "separatist movement," even a civil war in another country, in order to seek its own strategic goals or practical interests. This kind of action is selfish and very harmful to the target country as well as world order. There is no need to say that terrorist attacks are a common measure of a small group of people to threaten the majority. It naturally becomes the weapon of the various "nationalist separatists."

In the 21st century, the most important thing is to maintain the peace of the world. Recognition of all independent and sovereign states that currently exist is the precondition for such a goal. All current boundaries should be fully respected and any effort to change them should not be allowed. If there are still boundaries unresolved among countries, or colonies whose statuses are still unclear, these issues should be resolved as soon as possible by the involved countries, with the assistance of the United Nations if necessary.

There are different trends in different parts of the world today. In Western Europe, countries are eager to establish a united league, the "European Union." They have no passport control and taxes within the borders of the Union. They now use the same currency. In this region, where two world wars started, territory has become less significant. Capital and labor move freely across the border and cooperation has brought economic prosperity for all participant nations. On the other extreme case, the wars and conflicts among ethnic groups (Serbs, Croatians, Muslims, Albanians, etc.) made the nation of Yugoslavia fall apart and completely destroyed the political stability and economic achievement of the last half century. The most important reasons for this human disaster were "nationalism" and the seeking of political independence for each ethnic group in a new "nation-building" process. This is a misleading direction to resolve the problems between ethnic groups in a modern nation.

VI. "Human Rights" Should be the Ideal Framework to Solve Domestic Ethnic Conflicts

The United States treats its ethnic groups as "cultural minorities" and never allows them to become a political power seeking "independence" or control a territory. At the same time, the United States has the policy to help and assist its ethnic minorities under the principle of "human rights" and the "rights of citizenship." It has been quite successful in smoothing down racial and ethnic conflicts in the US. But the US encourages the ethnic groups in other countries to fight for "independence" and connects the previous principle of "self-determination" to the issue of "human rights." This is a typical double standard viewpoint to deal with domestic and foreign affairs.

It will be helpful to resolve problems by applying the US policy dealing with its domestic ethnic issues to other parts of the world. In general, all social problems related to ethnic groups should be handled as domestic "human rights" and "rights and responsibility" issues. Of course, the international society will pay attention to help nations to improve their situation of "human rights" according to their history and conditions in political progress and economic achievement.

If we really accept the above ideas and suggestions, this world will certainly become more peaceful and many ethnic groups will be able to obtain their rights and interests without destroying their nation and themselves.

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