

The Development and Variety about the Ethnic Population in Modern China

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The conception of “nationality” was quite ambiguous in Chinese history, for the blurred boundaries between the Han nationality and the minority nationalities, as well as the ambiguous boundaries among the minority nationalities. After the foundation of PRC in 1949, the Chinese government made a series of ethnic policies such as the system of regional autonomy in minority areas. The implement of these policies was based on the premise that the ethnic composition had been clarified. So the government transplanted the system of “identification of ethnic groups” from Soviet Union. By the implement of “identification of ethnic groups” and register of “nationality” in household documents, the government “identified” quite a few “ambiguous” groups on the verge of ethnic groups as nationalities of their own since 1950s to 1970s. The boundaries between ethnic groups have become clear and the “nationality” of each citizen has been fixed, and people’s sense of nationality was strengthened and consolidated.

Distribution of ethnic minorities in China shows the character of large dispersion and small settlements. About 2/3 ethnic population lives in autonomous areas, while the proportion of the minority nationalities in every autonomous area varies from each other. The average household size of the ethnic minorities is always above which of the Han nationality. Inter-ethnic marriage is common in the provinces of east China, but rare in minority areas of west China, such as Xinjiang and Tibet.

Before the 2nd national population census (1964), the mortality rate in the concentration areas of ethnic groups was very high because of the terrible health care. And the natural growth rate of the minority nationalities was lower than that of the Han nationality. Between the 2nd and 3rd national population census (1982), with the improvement of medical and health service in the minority areas, the mortality rate of the minority nationalities decreasing sharply while the natural growth rate of them continued increasing. Between the 3rd and the 4th census (1990), the natural population growth of the minority nationalities was greatly above that of the Han nationality. The reason was multiple, besides the decreasing mortality rate, also due to the loose birth control, lower marriage age for the ethnic minorities and the change of ethnic nationality by many Han people. However, with the decreasing birth rate of the minority nationalities there has been a slowdown in the natural growth rate of them since the 1990s. Some minority nationalities, such as Korean and Manchu people, have undergone the demographic transition from “high birth rate, low mortality rate and high natural growth rate” to “low birth rate, low mortality rate and low natural growth rate” that ahead of Han nationality.