

ETHNIC MINORITIES IN CHINA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KOREAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of the presence of ethnic minorities in China and their importance as well as their general historical aspects, focusing on the establishment of Korean migrants as part of these groups. Therefore, the article is divided into three parts. The first part refers to data and basic information about the presence of ethnic minorities in China such as population, geographic location, and ethnic minority policies. The second part looks at the Korean migration process, including important historical events, the Japanese influence, and the conditions they faced. After analyzing these issues, it is possible to perceive the great ethnic diversity present in Chinese territory. The Korean people being one of them, their history is directly aligned with their customs, beliefs and geographic location within the country. In addition, some problems are identified in relation to issues related to the Korean-Chinese people's concern for their identity, which are addressed in the third part of this research.

Key-words: Minorities in China. Chinese Koreans. Korea. Migration. Ethnic Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The Western narrative that China's population is ethnically uniform is outdated. The presence of various ethnic minorities in Chinese territory is the result of years of history, cultural, political, and geographical changes, which cannot be ignored in any analysis of the customs and general aspects of such a vast country. Thus, "modern China cannot be understood without a clear recognition of its ethnic complexity and the impact of this complexity on social-political change and international relations" (DILLON, 2016, p. 2).

To understand that, it is necessary to highlight the difficulties China faced in defining its borders and formulating an identity whose goal was to unify and strengthen the nation, an aspect that often goes unnoticed, but which illustrates the challenge of defining, above all, geographical boundaries compatible with the numerous ethnic groups in the territory. Thus, there are clear examples of situations in which the dilemma of geographical division and the question of whether culture alone is capable of uniting a people into a nation can be seen.

For example, the identity context of the island of Taiwan led to a delicate process

in the quest for its independence. Although the territory is still culturally considered part of China, it has undergone very different historical processes throughout history, as has its cultural composition and divergent territorial position. First, Taiwan did not become a Chinese province until 1885. Ten years later, however, the island came under Japanese rule, as a result of the expansion and domination phase that the second country underwent at that time, and it was not until 1945, with the end of World War II, that the small Chinese territory was abandoned by Japan. Moreover, the political division of China into the People's Republic of China and Nationalist China (Taiwan) led to even greater differences in identity between the two territories. By highlighting the different historical processes and the strengthening of the cultures, one can understand from this the almost non-existent sense of belonging to the country. This is one of the major problems facing China, in addition, of course, to separatist movements in other autonomous provinces.

Thus, the Korean community in Chinese territory brings with them some typical aspects of their own culture, which are also related to the historical context in which they settled in the region.

The conditions and processes that this population continues to face today are largely part of the way in which aspects of the treatment of various ethnic groups have been internalized by the Chinese government. Henceforth, it is necessary to better analyze their composition and influence, as well as the living conditions of minorities within the country, as well as aspects of the establishment of the Korean community.

ETHNIC MINORITIES IN CHINA

Currently, there are 56 ethnic groups recognized by the PCR (People's Republic of China) in China. Among them, the Han group is considered dominant in terms of population, which is roughly related to the term "Chinese people," a name that comes from the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD). Although they make up 91% of the total population, the Han are also the result of a great deal of mixing, having eight languages in their composition: Mandarin, Hakka, Gan, Xiang, Northern and Southern Min, Yue, and Wu, expressed through Chinese characters, whether traditional or simplified (DILLON, 2016).

The main minority groups are Mongols, Manchus, Zhuangs, Tibetans, Miao, Uyghurs, Koreans, Yao, Dong, and

many others. They make up about 114 million people or 8% of China's total population. They are mainly concentrated on the borders, but there are also groups scattered in major cities. In addition, the life of these people is becoming more and more similar to that of the Han majority, especially when it comes to daily life and monoculture, which is especially prevalent in the main cities. However, the different cultures of these small groups, such as culinary dishes, clothing, and religions, are much more evident in the countryside (DILLON, 2016).

Following this idea, the influence of the Chinese communists is significant when considering the beginning of the concern for the quality of life of people who do not fit into the Han group. As part of the political propaganda for the preservation of a multi-ethnic nation, various measures were taken in the period up to 1934 to guarantee the rights of these groups and protect them from the Chinese government, which were called ethnic minority policies. These introduced measures addressed fundamental issues for the preservation of these peoples and gave them some special rights within the Chinese constitution, such as the waiver of certain fees and taxes, government restrictions on the family, and preferential treatment

for the right to education and work, while also maintaining freedom of cultural expression with some reservations for those which are considered superstitious (HASMATH AND MAURER-FAZIO, 2016).

In addition, there is the right to use one's native language (noting that Mandarin should also be learned in schools) and, more importantly, the right to practice one's religion because, as the author Michael Dillon insightfully writes, "religious differences are an important marker of the division between ethnic groups" (DILLON, 2016, p. 5).

Finally, before these transformations within Chinese society, the Korean community establishes itself as one of the most important minorities in the territory, because despite its young history (by Chinese standards) in the region, it occupies a position of reference in several areas, especially education. In addition, the daily life of the community is also being transformed by these policies, creating mechanisms of experience that will be further explored in this study.

THE IMMIGRATION PROCESS OF KOREAN SOCIETY

To fully understand the main subject that will be discussed in this paper, the historical background on the

immigration of Korean communities to China is necessary. The migratory flow of Koreans moving to China began in the second half of the 19th century, motivated by the famine that stroke many Korean farm families in the northeastern provinces, that previously had suffered from floods and droughts, causing their land to become unproductive, therefore, generating poor harvests (KWON T-H, 1997, p.03). Thereat, without its form of sustain, and seeking to evade the collection of abusive taxes, some of those families decided to pursue a better life in a different place, with this in mind, the first settlement of Korean people in the region of Manchuria took place, the primary reason which the area was chosen because of its fertile lands, according to Tai-Hwan Kwon (1997, p.03), the number of Koreans in Manchuria was reported at 77,000 in 1870 and reached 200,000 in 1900.

Although the beginning of the movement was under the circumstances disclosed, it was only during the first half of the 20th century that the number of Koreans migrating to Manchuria increased. Hereupon, the period marked from 1910 to 1945 was engraved in Korean history as one of the most difficult for its population: the Japanese colonial rule caused a more significant wave of

overseas migration in which the most searched destination was China and Japan, the numbers of Koreans in Manchuria during this period had an exponential growth going from 459,400 in 1920, to 1,658,600 in 1944 (KWON T-H, 1997, p.05). Even though the reason to go to any of those countries was practically the same, to escape the poverty that came from the rural exploitation that took place under the colonial regime, the characteristics of the migration in each country were divergent. Those who went to Japan were employed in construction fields, factories, and mines (KWON T-H, 1997, p.06), and often were treated as less of human beings, whereas in China, the immigrants started to live in agriculture-based society, planting rice in specific, in which Koreans formed the dominant ethnic group in the areas where they were settled (KWON T-H, 1997, p.06).

The Korean community in China was also a great command force fighting Japan in 1945, being an important piece of the Manchurian Provincial Committee (MPC) an anti-japanese resistance, according to David Volodzko in an article in *The Diplomat* (2015)

Koreans weren't simply the most zealous members of the resistance movement in Manchuria, they were by far the most numerous too. According to Chong-Sik Lee's *Revolutionary*

Struggle in Manchuria, in 1930 the Communist Party in the former Chientao District comprised 3,800 Koreans and 150 Chinese. And Paul Lee writes, "virtually all of the 10,000 organized peasant families were Korean families. Even as late as 1934, more than half of all CCP members in Manchuria were Korean, and over 95 percent of guerrilla armies consisted of Koreans." In short, the MPC was Manchuria's anti-Japanese resistance, and overwhelmingly it was a *Korean* resistance (VOLODZKO, 2015, *The Diplomat*).

After the liberation from Japan, a large percentage of the Koreans in China decided to flood back to their motherland, creating a wave of repatriation, the returners of Manchuria were estimated to be 700 thousand people (KWON T-H, 1997, p.07). However, almost 60% of the Koreans in Manchuria decided to stay, as a result, the community continued to grow and flourish in the following years.

KOREANS AS A MINORITY IN CHINA: THE ETHNIC IDENTITY

After the liberation, China's civil war, and the end of world war II, the Communist party recognized, in 1949, Korean-Chinese as an ethnic minority, also known as joseonjok (The Economist, 2018), and granted the communities their own Korean prefecture, Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (a city in the province of Jilin, the area was previously a

part of Manchuria), being considered citizen since the beginning, and having access to rights and tools to maintain their ethnic identity, for example, the use of Korean as an official language in the region. Korean society as a whole is very homogeneous in various ways, such as culturally, physically, and sometimes even mentally, and considers aspects of its culture, such as the language, history, tradition, cuisine, and education in high regard, those things form a major part of their ethnic identity, and even in communities in different countries, this is considered to be a base of their identity. In China, the Korean-Chinese minority is seen as a model minority, especially for its high achievements in the academic field, being considered very capable and hardworking people, having the biggest rates of college acceptance out of the other minorities, having a rate of 4.5% for male students and 6.1% for female, in contrast with the 2.5% and 3.7% for male and females, respectively, for the Han Chinese as is pointed in the 2010 census (Arirang TV, 2015).

Despite being a model prefecture, the Yanbian people suffered deeply during the period of the Cultural Revolution in 1961, which happened after the great famine that affected the whole Chinese population. In an interview for

Arirang tv in 2015 is said that the red guard groups, formed by Mao Tse-Tong, considered nationalism a symbol of anti-revolution, as a result, the government banned the use of Korean and the hanbok (traditional Korean garment) to extinguish the sense of Korean nationalism in the territory, and it culminated on the closure of many ethnic schools in the area. Besides not being able to practice their own culture, the population was also struggling in other ways, the ones who were spotted by de red guards under the accusation of being anti-revolutionary would often face brutal consequences, such as torture, the grandfather of Yoon Woon-Gul, a Yanbian journalist interviewed by Arirang, was a victim of those acts. It is believed that the torture that he faced was the main reason for his precocious death, his story is similar to many other families from the area.

However, after the establishment of the new China, the situation changed, turning back to its initial point, in which it was allowed to practice and upkeep the Korean culture freely. In addition, taking a lap in time, the living conditions of the Chinese Koreans faced some switch-over in the following of return of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, in 1992. Quoting an article in The

Economist (2018), the opening of full diplomatic relations between both countries lead to a movement of Korean firms inserting themselves into the Chinese market, the presence of those companies in Chinese territory resulted in a big rating of locals, ethnic Koreans in China, being hired in high position inside those establishments, that were often settled in different cities, for example, Beijing, causing a decentralization of the community. Besides that, another consequence of the return of diplomatic relations was the immigration wave of people from the minority to other countries, seeking better opportunities, often looking for academic recognition or insertion in the Korean market, out of 1.8 million people in the group about 1 million of them are living outside China, being 700,000 of them the ones who entered South Korea (The Economist, 2018).

Currently, the main concern that the Chinese-Korean people face is the fear of the ending of their community, as day after day is becoming more visible the shrinking of the group. To properly discuss the problem, it is necessary to evaluate the causes previously disclosed, the decentralization of these specific communities plays a big part in the possible disappearance of it, when

Korean businesses opened in China it created a flow of internal migration of the Chinese-Korean population, it also collaborated to an occurring process of identity conflict that the younger generation of Koreans in China experience, the next generation of the ethnic Koreans that were born and raised outside of Yanbian have faced a disconnection with their Korean heritage, not being able to upkeep their costumes. After the opening of relations between China and South Korea, more than 850 Korean ethnic schools were shut down (Arirang Tv, 2015), resulting in a lack of opportunities for Korean kids to learn about their identity, having to rely on private education, in a big metropolis like Beijing the situation is even more complex, the city doesn't have any ethnic schools, the most outstanding project for Korean education in the area is a non-profit organization, the Jungeum Korean School, that allows kids to learn the Korean language and its alphabet, the hangul (Arirang Tv, 2015).

Besides that, the identity conflict can go beyond the lack of connection with Korean culture. While some of the first generations would consider themselves Koreans, the newer generations consider themselves to be Chinese, nonetheless, a major part of the

population considers China as their motherland and Korea as their fatherland, but caring about the Chinese identity further, since they are officially Chinese. The prejudice present in Korea against the Chinese-Koreans can also be seen as an aggravating factor in the problem of identity conflict, as Volodzko points out in *The Diplomat*

Sadly, many newcomers have suffered human rights violations at the hands of their South Korean brothers and sisters, prompting the South Korean Ministry of Justice to announce a crackdown on such behavior, while others have themselves perpetrated violence against their South Korean hosts. Illustrating how little things have changed, the 2013 South Korean film *New World* features a group of Yanbian Koreans portrayed as uncultured imbeciles. (VOLODZKO, 2015, *The Diplomat*).

They also can face discrimination from the Chinese people, which can form a sense of non-belonging in both societies, creating a further identity problem.

Despite those problems, the identity issue is not the main cause for the shrinking of the Chinese-Korean community. The main problem is the large contingent of Chinese-Koreans immigrating to abroad, more than 50% of Koreans in China, as said previously, have fled China since 1992, causing the annual population growth rate of the minority between 2000 and 2010 to be -4.8%, while

the rate of people aged 65 and older per 10,000 population to be 12.6%, being 1.3% bigger than the same rate for South Korean, that is already an aging country (Arirang Tv, 2015). To simplify those data, there is a practical example, the Mingan Village in Helong City had more than 300 residents of Korean ethnic in the 1980s, but in 2015 there were only about 60 residents, and they were mostly elderly since the youth of the minority group is leaving the country. The decline and aging of this ethnic group in China configures a situation of disappearance of the minority, which could have a real impact on the preservation of the Korean identity throughout China.

CONCLUSION

China is far from being a country characterized as culturally homogeneous. The presence of different ethnic groups, formed through diverse cultural and historical processes, is an essential feature of the country and shapes its internal and external political aspects. Thus, the division into 56 groups dealing with different customs confirms this diverse composition and emphasizes the need for acceptance by the Chinese government. In this way, it is noticeable the great influence that the Communist

Party had on the formulation of policies for these communities, which, despite certain restrictions, now also have the right to exercise essential characteristics and customs for their people.

An interesting point is that despite the positive influence of the Party, national movements such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution have also shaped these groups through ethnic persecution, which brought as a positive consequence the guarantee of the establishment of special rights within the Chinese Constitution for minorities, as is the case with the Korean community. Another aspect is that the settlement of Koreans in Yanbian is strongly influenced by the difficulties faced by the community during the 19th century, just as the settlement of Japanese in Korean territory spurred the migration movement and became an important part of the revolutionary groups. Despite the creation of the autonomous prefecture, the search to maintain an ethnic identity encounters difficulties that go far beyond the guarantee of owning land. In addition to the Cultural Revolution, factors such as the decentralization of the population in search of better work and study opportunities and the disconnection with their Korean heritage also complicate the

attempt to erase the sense of Korean nationalism.

Therefore, as a solution to the problem presented in the last part of this article, it is appropriate to propose a joint action of the Chinese and Korean governments, which could launch initiatives aimed at preserving the typical Korean culture in the daily life of the community, as well as maintaining the academic and quality of these people in China, since these are the main reasons why minorities are attracted to the country. It is also important to create employment opportunities with good conditions and wages, as an appeal to maintain the minority group in China, to combat the waves of immigration.

NOTES

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