

**Report on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sino German Dialogue on Political and Social Transformation  
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**Ethnicity and Integration**

This report is given from the standpoint of a member of the German delegation without expert knowledge of the political and social situation in China with regard to ethnic and minority affairs. It will give a summary, some impressions and an evaluation based solely on the discussions at the conference.

*General Atmosphere of this Year's Dialogue*

The conference took place in a very open spirit of mutual interest and curiosity. In light of recent developments in China including ethnic tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang and in Germany with resurfacing debates and conflicts around the discrimination and integration of migrants and citizens with a history of migration, the two delegations were eager to learn about each others perceptions, questions and solutions on the topic of ethnicity and integration. It took a while, however, until a true dialogue emerged, given the differences between the two sets of problems, of vocabularies and of discourses. Over the course of the conference, these differences became clearer to all participants and commonalities were identified. A meaningful dialogue on these common aspects was conducted while several other lines of discussion remained rather unconnected, more or less in parallel spaces. Differences in opinion and assessment emerged not only between the two delegations, but also between members of the two delegations themselves. The extent to which members of the Chinese delegation contradicted each other on several points contributed to the impression of an open atmosphere of debate and surprised some of the German participants, who possibly had expected a less liberal atmosphere of debate. Both delegations repeatedly voiced criticism on the state of affairs in their respective countries and disappointment with what has been achieved in matters of ethnicity, equality and integration so far. Members of both delegations emphasized repeatedly the desire to learn from the other side, while the actual concrete potential of transferring experiences from one nation's problems to the other seemed somewhat limited. Some German participants certainly needed to adjust some of their views on China during the discussion. Chinese participants stressed a multi-ethnic ethos for the Chinese nation, rejected that assimilation to the majority could be a solution to the problems, showed doubts and reflections on the failures of integration in China, also regarding recent events in some provinces, and consistently voiced support for preferential treatment for minorities. All this was brought forward with insistence and sincerity. Experts on the German side concentrated on the complexities of ethnic identity construction, negotiation and performance. While many differences of the situation were identified between the two countries, some aspects did show sufficient similarity, so discussion and mutual learning became possible.

*Different Situations with regard to the Politics of Identity, Ethnicity and Migration*

Several talks on different panels gave overviews of the situations in China and Germany with regard to minorities, migrants and ethnic groups. While in China ethnic minorities – 56 are recognized today - have lived there for centuries, Germany needs to deal mostly with the result of migration into the country during recent generations. Recently, migration between regions in China has resulted in ethnically mixed populations in many regions and cities, which makes the situation in some aspects comparable to the situation in Europe. After a long history of hierarchy between China's ethnic groups, of domination, repression and discrimination, modern China has developed an ethos of equality and of a multi-ethnic nation, at least on the level of official ideology and stated intent. Many problems with inequality and discrimination between ethnic groups persist and are addressed by the government through a variety of policies, laws and institutions. Most Chinese speakers voiced support for this set of policies and institutions and for the goals of equality, anti-discrimination and regional autonomy for ethnic groups. Many conceded that these goals are still far away and much remains to be done. Some arguments were exchanged about the "soft" character of many of these provisions. Most of them are granted from above, cannot be claimed in court and are not sanctioned in case of violation. Although many Chinese speakers seemed convinced that the general approach of the Chinese government is progressive, the events of recent years in Tibet and Xinjiang caused some to voice doubts and concerns about flaws and insufficiencies in China's ethnic policy. Several German speakers gave overviews of the situation in Europe after decades of migration into Europe and Germany, of political and cultural debates around the development and some of the tensions that have arisen. Apart from older groups of labour migrants - for example from Poland - who have been assimilated by now, Germany's self image has predominantly been one of ethnic homogeneity. Only very recently, as recent as the year 2000, the idea of a multi-ethnic citizenry has been instituted on the legal level with the reform of citizenship laws. Obviously, the adaptation of Germany's self-understanding to the realities and potentials of an interconnected world is lagging behind China's in this regard. Several speakers gave accounts of ongoing problems with inequality of opportunities in education and the labour market and of a certain ideological backlash against migrants and against Germans with a family background of migration in recent years.

### *Material vs. Identity Issues*

One difference in emphasis was clearly visible. Most Chinese speakers took ethnic identities and the definition of ethnic groups more or less as a pre-given entity. The attitude seemed to be: There are these groups and we need to deal with them. Assimilation is neither expected nor intended, ethnic identities are not questioned, tolerance and an ethos of equality are required. While this is obviously progressive compared to policies of repression a negative flipside of this approach is the essentialisation of ethnic identities and a certain folkloristic or exoticist gaze onto the other, which sometime did surface in statements of the Chinese speakers about ethnic minorities in China. With regard to Tibetans, for example, several speakers stressed how charming Han-Chinese consider their dances. One speaker even pointed out, how allegedly alien science and technology seem to be to the Tibetan as such. Little sensibility for the problematic nature of these projections and reductions of members of a group to their expected cliché could be heard. Many German speakers emphasized the constructed and performed character of ethnic / minority identities, the negotiation that takes place between minority and majority identity, the play and power dynamics between them, the mutual definition of these groups, and the potential desire of minorities to reject expectations that majorities might have with regard to "ethnic" culture, or "culturalization". Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" was presented, a way for minorities to deal with expectations and play with them in a tactical way. Gandhi's approach to represent and perform Indian postcolonial identity served as illustration. American identity theorists have also rejected folkloristic multiculturalism. That was also briefly discussed. While Chinese speakers did not show much interest in the theories of fluidity and performativity of ethnicity, in the course of the discussion it became clear why: The hard material problems of ethnic

minorities in China are on a level of fierce urgency and doubtless priority. Several Chinese speakers pointed out how poverty rates are higher in rural areas, even higher in ethnic minority areas and especially grim among ethnic minority women. Here, some of the problems are related to local customs and traditions such as arranged marriages, lack of property rights for women, high rates of illiteracy. China's social safety net does not fully cover these segments of the population and the government's programs on poverty elimination benefit mostly males. Again, as in many areas, the problem seemed not a lack of awareness or good intention on the part of the central government but insufficient implementation of these programs. While there is progress in poverty elimination and still dynamic growth in China's economy, the situation of ethnic minorities has partly even deteriorated. Professors from the Chinese delegation were quite concerned about this and, admittedly, the German delegation couldn't provide much input on these matters.

### *Government / Institutional Approach vs. Civil Society / Empowerment Approach*

It became apparent to participants that policy approaches contrasted in one major aspect. The Chinese government relies mostly on institutional support and top-down government programs, whereas German minority policies discussed at the conference were mostly initiatives out of civil society oriented towards empowerment of the relevant groups. Second generation migrant women groups with so-called hybrid identities were presented as examples. The difference was not a sharp, mutually exclusive one though, since these programs are also government-funded and since Chinese speakers also presented policy examples which had the government provide media infrastructures for ethnic minorities in order to enable them to articulate themselves culturally and voice their concerns. Several German speakers stressed the need for both and a certain tiredness with the civil society obsession and hostility to the state in some political milieus in the West. As mentioned before, Chinese members of the delegation repeatedly pointed out the difficulties regarding the implementation of the often well-intentioned and progressive policy initiatives and goals of the central government, resistance coming from both provincial majority elites and traditional and sometimes repressive customs in minority cultures themselves. When discussing the problems of representation for ethnic / migrant minorities in the media, Germans had to explain the dual media system in Germany and the ways in which influence on both public and private media needs to rely on decentralized methods of pushing minority members into mainstream media and cannot be exerted in a simple top down manner. Chinese examples for ethnic media infrastructures dealt less with strengthening the position of minority members in mainstream culture but with providing local infrastructures for articulating, preserving and upholding traditional and folkloristic segments of culture. The different approach to ethnic identities explained above might play a role here. Germans bemoaned, however, that infrastructures such as these are very rare in Germany and are partly under pressure or being closed down. More of these would certainly be of help in Germany as well.

### *Education, Preferential Treatment, Job Access*

Broad consensus was seen on the need for equal access to education. After speakers characterized the situations in both countries, the same consensus emerged on the assessment that this is easier said than done. The German side was quite impressed with the wide presence and acceptance of preferential treatment provisions for ethnic minorities in the Chinese education system, something which the German side supported but had to report as unimaginable in German society due to broad political resistance. Chinese speakers gave accounts of the introduction of universal compulsory schooling in China and the difficulties that means in a country with many remote and poor rural areas. The development process is still ongoing in this field and the need for further improvement of the quality and coverage of the school system was stressed by most speakers. Problems in

these efforts are not only due to lack of resources but often enough due to traditional tribe and clan structures, traditions of home schooling, gender inequality in local traditions, illiteracy and lack of appreciation for education in families. The need for skilled people in a competitive global economy was stressed as one of the motivations for the central government to stay active in these efforts. Speakers from Germany complained that migration and migrants are not viewed as a potential for dealing with the problems of demographics and skilled labour shortages in European societies. Migration is still, after all these years, framed as a “problem” in the mass media and in the views of the majority in Germany. On the question of access to education, one central experience from Europe could be introduced into the discussion: free and formally equal access is not enough. Several speakers pointed out that formally, education is free and equal in most European countries but many people still do not participate or benefit equally. Reasons were identified in deeply entrenched cultural prejudices and discrimination on the part of the majority, in the comparative advantages for majority children due to earlier introduction into hegemonic culture through the family and in the undervaluation of school education, higher education and knowledge of majority culture in some minority families. In this area, political non-action equals the proliferation of discrimination. Intercultural education and interculturally re-negotiated curricula were some of the methods discussed in addressing the problem. The situation in France served as a bad example of how formally free equal access accompanied by an attitude of expected assimilation can lead into an integration disaster. Preferential treatment of minorities and quotas were supported by many speakers. In the job market, however, neither China nor Germany has introduced quotas for minority members, except in jobs related to ethnic affairs.

### *Tibet, Xinjiang, One Child Policy*

The recent events and ongoing problems in Xinjiang and Tibet were discussed repeatedly though they were not the focus of the debate. Several Chinese speakers expressed concerns about the outbreak of violence in these two regions and quoted them as reasons to re-think the ethnic policies of the Chinese government and to doubt the sufficiency of past approaches. The Chinese delegation was not only willing but seemed at times eager to discuss the issue and articulate a Chinese view as opposed to an expected Western assessment. Beyond the obvious and unambiguous rejection of separatism, a certain insecurity about the failures of integration policies in Tibet could be detected. Many speakers supported the suggestion from the German delegation, that a more open policy regarding access for international media during times of unrest would have been better for all sides. It might have resulted in a more balanced and differentiated report of events in the Western media. Again, an understanding was articulated that assimilation cannot be the goal of ethnic policies in Tibet. The patriarchal attitude of a development project in Tibet, which is handed down from a Han majority / central government to a Tibetan minority / local population was identified as a problem in the discussion. One speaker from the Chinese delegation gave a long critical speech on Western utopian and exoticist images of Tibet (“Shangri-La”, search for spiritual consolation). On the other hand, rather exoticist and folkloristic projections on Tibetans were also voiced from the Chinese delegation (“Tibetans don’t like science”). They were, however, quickly corrected by other participants in the Chinese delegation, who pointed out that the interest in higher skilled jobs among members of ethnic minorities obviously varies according to the state of development and education in a certain region. A brief discussion on the experiences and the state of affairs regarding China’s One Child Policy came up towards the end of the conference. Chinese participants had different assessments, they all stressed the reason for this policy in the enormous size of the Chinese population and the problematic situation regarding food security, which has improved but is still grim in parts of the country. The policy is under review now. It is one more area of preferential treatment for ethnic minorities who are allowed more children. Again, preferential treatment for ethnic minorities in biopolitical areas such as family planning would be unimaginable in Germany, where highly problematic public debates take place about how

underclass and migrant families procreate “too much”, while white middleclass women are enticed to give birth by all kinds of government benefits. The Chinese delegation gave varying and in parts contradictory assessments of the gender justice effects of the policy and of the education problems for unregistered illegal children.

### *Normative Orientation of Policies*

All participants of the conference articulated an ethos of equality and anti-discrimination. Also, there was a strong consensus, that the goal of integration and equality can and should not be a forced assimilation of ethnic minorities to majority culture and customs. The normative goal for all participants seemed to find an appropriate balance between common ground and preserving difference. Stated differently, one should fairly negotiate identities and opportunities between members of different groups. Both delegations made clear, however, that in their countries that is by no means an evident view shared by all or even by a majority. Policies, advocacy and the work of cultural articulation and political debate are needed in order to negotiate the relations between majority and minority groups. Both sides knew about normative conflicts between different values in this area. Economic development can come into conflict with the preservation of local or ethnic customs and traditions. The preservation of ethnic or cultural traditions can contradict gender equality. The goal of access to education can come into conflict with a village or family climate that does not favour higher education for women. The preservation of traditions and cultures can sometimes not be supported by younger generations of a minority. From the perspective of younger people of ethnic groups, the goal of integration into mainstream society and of attaining positions of power can contradict a strong emphasis on the performing the culture of their parents. The disappearance of minority languages can be one result of such conflicts. Sometimes majorities expect minorities to strongly articulate their expected “culture” and “ethnicity” in order to maintain hierarchy and reinforce their own identity through this difference. Normative ambivalence abounds in this area and participants on both sides were very aware of it. Thus, one consensus emerged: There are no easy solutions in ethnic matters.