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CHINA IS REPLACING ETHNIC LANGUAGES WITH MANDARIN

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Wary of efforts by the US and West to bring about the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), particularly as memories of the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union and collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) still remain sharply etched, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been focussed on strengthening the CCP to ensure it retains its monopoly on power. Xi Jinping has also long had an interest in united front work and ethnic minority issues and in 2017 took over as head of the powerful Central Leading Small Group on United Front Work, which exercises direct control over the formulation and implementation of policies for China's ethnic minorities. Since then there has been a noticeable uptick in united front activity concerning the ethnic minorities.

2. Recognising that the language of a people is the key to their retaining their culture, traditions and history, the united front, among its other policies, has centered on replacing ethnic languages taught in schools in ethnic areas with Putonghua (Mandarin). A factor would be the heightened apprehension among China's leaders, following the outbreak of the China-US trade war and rapid deterioration in bilateral ties, that the US, West and 'hostile neighbours' would attempt to fan discontent among the ethnic minorities residing in China's border provinces. A pointer is the attention that Beijing pays to Nepal.

3. An indication that tough policies for accelerating the assimilation of ethnic minorities, instead of the more accommodative policies of Deng Xiaoping's era, would be implemented is the recent change at the helm of the body responsible for ethnic minority affairs. On December 14, 2020, Chen Xiaojiang, a 66-year-old Han cadre, was appointed to head the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, breaking a tradition followed since 1954 of having a member of one of China's 56 ethnic minority groups head the body. The change comes in the wake of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission being placed under direct Party control and bringing it under the CCP Central Committee's United Front Work Department in 2018. Till then it was under China's State Council.

4. The CCP has been making systematic efforts to replace the ethnic languages with Mandarin. It has sought to introduce Mandarin in place of the ethnic languages taught in schools in minority areas and regions. Efforts at assimilation of ethnic minorities into the Han mainstream includes selecting young students for education in schools and colleges in the Chinese Mainland. Many young students stay for decades at these schools and colleges with the more recent arrivals imbibing "Xi Jinping's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era"! While these efforts have been observed in varying degrees in

the Tibet and Xinjiang Autonomous Regions, since last year the policy is being enforced in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region too.

5. For example, in 1984 the CCP decided to establish schools for Tibetan students in Chinese provinces and cities as part of the so-called “Aid Tibet” programme. From the following year at least 16 Chinese provinces, like Tianjin, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Yunnan etc., began to annually admit 1,300 students, who had finished primary school, from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that Chinese government websites and the Tibet Daily had publicised that by January 2019, a total of 141,900 Tibetan students were enrolled in these schools, colleges and universities. Tibetan students were enrolled in a total of 75 junior high schools and senior high schools in 20 Chinese cities; 29 schools in 12 cities with secondary vocational classes; and 196 colleges and universities with Tibetan students. In 2020, there were 4,472 students from TAR taking college entrance examinations. These special schools for Tibetans supplement the CCP’s other efforts to assimilate Tibetans into the Han national mainstream and cultivate generations of Tibetans more comfortable with Chinese (Han) culture, language and ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Chinese authorities justify this educational system as intended to provide economic and social development in Tibet and benefit Tibet’s long-term stability.

6. Efforts have now begun to gradually replace Tibetan with Mandarin in Tibetan schools. A start has been made with Tibetan counties outside the Tibet Autonomous Region. Outside TAR, more than 50% of the schools have converted to the new system where students are taught all subjects in Putonghua with Tibetan as just a language class. An exception is Rebkong county in Ngaba and some schools in Golok and Ganzi Dzong which still follow the earlier practice. In other Tibetan areas outside TAR, both primary and secondary schools have implemented the new system. Politburo Standing Committee member and Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Wang Yang’s tour to the Golok Tibetan Prefecture in Qinghai Province on September 14-15, 2020, was intended to give a push to this process. The policy will be gradually extended into and across the TAR.

7. Active implementation of the new system began in TAR in 2015. Thus far, it is only Lhasa that has fully implemented the new system. Some primary schools in Nyingtri (Nyingchi) have begun implementing the new system. All the schools have nonetheless introduced a Putonghua promotion week each year in all prefectures in TAR.

8. A similar policy was crafted for the Uyghur ethnic minority in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region. From 2007, entrance exams at all levels of the Xinjiang education system began to change with the stress on minority students taking tests in their non-native language. Ethnic minority students were told to “master and use the nationally used language and writing system,” in other words, Chinese. Uyghur students also began being segregated from the age of 15 on the basis of their grades under a “secondary vocational training enrollment plan” and sent to vocational schools. A primary goal was to send more minority students, or Uyghurs, to Han-majority schools. 5000 Uyghur students began being enrolled annually in 16 schools in the Chinese mainland from 2007.

9. In August 2020, the Inner Mongolian government mandated that primary and secondary schools must use Mandarin (Putonghua) and not Mongolian, as the language of instruction.

The authorities implemented a unified Chinese language teaching plan. Hou Yuan, then Director of the Education Department, claimed that “textbooks reflect the will of the Communist Party and the State” and the use of unified textbooks was a “major decision” made by the CCP Central Committee. The policy triggered widespread resistance among Mongolians and more than 300,000 students staged protests and demonstrations in the Nei (Inner) Mongol capital of Hohhot in which government employees also joined. People worried that the unique Mongolian language and culture will be extinguished as a result of these policies.

10. Notwithstanding popular discontent, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has stepped up other efforts to accelerate assimilation of the Mongol people, possibly because they number only 5 million and are in a minority in the Autonomous Region. The Education Department of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, in a notice to publishing houses dated January 8, 2021, stated that in compliance with the instructions of the China National Textbook Committee it had conducted an “Ideological Special Investigation” and an audit of textbooks such as ‘Inner Mongolian History and Culture’, ‘Mongolian History’, ‘Hulunbuir History and Culture’, ‘Hetao History and Culture’, and ‘Korqin History and Culture (Trial)’. The notice declared that the textbooks did not adequately highlight “the awareness of common roots”, but instead emphasised individual “ethnic identity” and “ethnic awareness.” The Department of Education of Inner Mongolia had consequently decided to ban the use of the textbooks of ‘Inner Mongolia History and Culture’, ‘Mongolian History’, and ‘Hetao History and Culture’ from the Spring of 2021. It stated that the textbooks of ‘Hulunbeier History and Culture’ and ‘Korqin History and Culture (Trial)’ will not be used from the Fall semester of 2021.

11. On February 8, 2021, the ‘Regulations of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region on Promoting National Unity and Progress’, which had been approved by the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region People’s Congress on January 30, 2021, were publicised. Comprising 56 Articles, these stress the promotion of “traditional Chinese culture” and customs and assert that the Han and ethnic minorities are part of a ‘common community with a common destiny’. They also mandate that “religious groups, venues for religious activities, and religious schools shall fully implement the Party’s basic policy on religious work, adhere to the direction of sinicization of religion in China” and, in addition to actively promoting ethnic unity, will “support the leadership of the Communist Party of China, support the socialist system, adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and maintain national unity, the unification of the motherland, religious harmony and social stability”. Other restrictive provisions are in Article 54, which states that “It is forbidden to deny the Chinese ethnic community, slander national customs and habits, damage national dignity, and harm nationality”; Article 55 which asserts “No organization or individual may spread speech that is not conducive to national unity”; and Article 56 which warns against infiltration, subversion, sabotage, violent terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities etc. that disrupt national unity, ethnic unity, and social stability.

12. Following the publication of new Rules for the United Front Work Department (UFWD) in January 2021, the CCP CC’s UFWD convened a national meeting on January 18 in Beijing of UFWD Directors from all across China. Speaking at the meeting, Politburo Standing Committee member and CPPCC Chairman Wang Yang focussed on ethnic minorities and

religious affairs and, implying the need to hasten the process of assimilation, said “we need to mobilize all active factors that we can mobilize.”

13. On January 20, the Director of the Legal Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC), Shen Chungyao, announced during a meeting of the NPC Standing Committee that schools in “minority areas” were no longer allowed to teach their own languages. He declared such education to be “unconstitutional”. In a report that he presented, Shen Chungyao emphasised the superiority of national laws over local laws in autonomous provinces and regions by observing that all local regulations violate “the country’s major reform directions” and “the provisions of the higher-level law”. He said some local regulations that allow ethnic schools to use ethnic languages in teaching are inconsistent with Chinese Constitution's order to promote Putonghua in the country.

14. Viewed along with the UFWD policies including the ‘sinicisation’ of religions, especially Tibetan Buddhism, and the sustained ‘education’ of monks and nuns in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, it is apparent that the CCP’s efforts to effect the assimilation of the ethnic minorities into the Han national mainstream have accelerated.

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