



Depoliticisation or Repoliticisation? Analysing the “Second-Generation Minzu Policy” and Its Implications for State–Minority Relations in China

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Abstract. This paper examines whether China's proposed ‘second-generation minzu policy’ signifies the depoliticisation of ethnic issues, analysing its political implications for state-minzu relations. Through comparative case studies of Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, the research reveals this policy embodies a dual process: on the one hand, discursive depoliticisation promoting ethnic integration and shared national identity; on the other, institutional repoliticisation reinforcing state control while eroding substantive autonomy. By integrating discourse analysis with institutional tracing, this paper contends that this reconfiguration of governance structures constitutes not a political retreat, but a strategic transformation in how state power is exercised and legitimised within a multi-ethnic context. The findings offer insights for contemporary debates on ethnic governance in China, assimilation policies, and the tensions between integration and autonomy.

Keywords: Second-generation minzu policy; Depoliticization; Repoliticization; Ethnic governance; State-minority relations; Autonomy; Assimilation; China.

1 Introduction

China's governance of ethnic diversity has entered a new phase. The ‘first generation’ ethnic policies formulated in the early years of the People's Republic established the system of regional ethnic autonomy and recognised 56 ethnic groups. Since the early 21st century, a ‘second-generation minzu policy’ paradigm has emerged, rhetorically downplaying ethnic distinctions in favour of emphasising the ‘Chinese national community,’ cultural integration, and civic identity. This discursive shift is frequently labelled as ‘depoliticisation’. However, this paper challenges such descriptions and raises questions: To what extent does the ‘second-generation minzu policy’ genuinely reflect depoliticisation, and what are its political implications for state-minority relations? Theoretically, it tests two distinct perspectives: whether depoliticisation mitigates ethnic disputes or merely masks deeper administrative control, thereby advancing the debate on state integration versus institutional repression. From a practical standpoint, the

answer influences how policymakers, non-governmental organisations, and ethnic minority groups assess policy signals. Should discursive reforms coexist with institutional retrenchment, oversight should focus on policy implementation (education, autonomy provisions) rather than mere rhetoric. I argue that while this policy advances a depoliticised public discourse, it is frequently accompanied by institutional politicisation that erodes autonomy and reinforces state-led assimilation. Thus, ostensible depoliticisation may instead reflect a reconfiguration of state power, embedding control within frameworks of integration and securitisation. This paper distinguishes between depoliticisation at the discursive level and repoliticisation at the institutional level, making significant contributions to the relevant literature. It establishes metrics for both phenomena and, through empirical research, examines how they interact across three distinct regions. This shifts the discussion from normative assertions towards testable mechanisms.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The question of whether the “second-generation minzu policy” represents depoliticisation or repoliticisation is rooted in research into the historical construction of China's ethnic governance. Grasping the historical and conceptual foundations of ethnic institutions is essential to understanding the current transition. Relevant research documents the state-led ethnic classification project of the 1950s, which established the official classification system of 56 minzu groups (Mullaney, T.S., 2011)^[1]. As scholars have noted, this institutionalisation created a framework for state control over minority recognition, thereby generating enduring tensions between autonomy and assimilation (Wu, D.Y.H., 1990)^[2]. This has fuelled anxieties within minority communities, such as the Mongolian ethnic group, concerning identity preservation and linguistic continuity. Relevant ethnographic research indicates that these structural tensions manifest dynamically within the lived experiences of ethnic minority youth. These adolescents engage in complex identity negotiations through multilingual practices to navigate shifting educational policies (Ai, D., 2023)^[3].

The core theoretical debate centres on the concept of “depoliticisation”. Prominent sociologist Ma Rong advocates this approach, urging a shift away from ethnic regional autonomy and politicised ethnic labels towards strengthening a shared national identity (Ma, R., 2007)^[4]. However, this perspective has been subject to strong criticism. Scholars contend that current policies frequently align with the Han Chinese privilege structure, achieving assimilation through integration (Hasmath, R., 2023)^[5]. Similarly, other scholar contends that policies promoting unified national identity frequently reinforce Han cultural norms as implicit standards (Elliott, M.C., 2015)^[6]. These critiques suggest that discursive shifts may not represent governance regression but rather a reconfiguration of state power, wherein depoliticised language may mask practices of institutional repoliticisation.

Language and education are key domains where these contradictions manifest. Research on bilingual education reveals a persistent, widespread trend: the prioritisation of Mandarin promotion for national integration often comes at the expense of minority

languages. In Inner Mongolia, researcher analysed reform measures that reduced Mongolian language instruction under the banner of ‘linguistic unity’ (Atwood, C.P., 2020)^[7]. Similarly, research in Yi-speaking regions indicates that bilingual education frequently serves as a transitional tool towards Mandarin dominance (Rehamo, A. and Harrell, S., 2020)^[8]. This dynamic corroborates the perspective that language policy fundamentally concerns the ‘texture of power’ (Dwyer, A.M., 1998)^[9], directly influencing the political and cultural standing of minority groups.

Finally, the literature on media and securitisation examines how state narratives re-shape ethnic relations. Scholars analyse how state-led patriotic campaigns and associated rhetoric construct narratives of national unity, which can incorporate ethnic differences into a single, state-centred framework (Zhang, C., & Ma, Y., 2023)^[10]. In Xinjiang and Tibet, this discourse intertwines with the concept of securitisation. Scholars have examined how ethnic identities—particularly that of the Uyghur people—are framed as potential security threats, thereby justifying governance measures that re-politicise ethnic issues through a stability maintenance lens (Byler, D., 2022)^[11]. This process resonates with the concept of ‘internal orientalism’, wherein ethnic minorities are simultaneously othered and subordinated within a Han-centric hierarchy (Schein, L., 1997)^[12]. Collectively, these studies offer a framework for analysing ‘second-generation’ policies as complex interplay between historical legacies, discursive innovations, institutional power, and securitised governance.

Building upon Ma's proposition and critique, this paper argues that seemingly depoliticised discourses may align with institutional tightening. This paper makes three contributions: (1) conceptually distinguishing discursive depoliticisation from institutional repoliticisation; (2) establishing measurable indicators for both at the methodological level; (3) empirically testing this dual mechanism across three contrasting regions. It redefines depoliticisation as a governance strategy of latent ambiguity rather than an unambiguous trend towards liberalisation.

3 Research Method

This study employs a comparative case study design to examine whether China's “second-generation minzu policies” constitute discursive depoliticisation alongside institutional repoliticisation. Three regions are selected and compared: Xinjiang and Tibet, characterised by pronounced securitisation and stringent control; and Inner Mongolia, reflecting a more nuanced path of cultural-linguistic assimilation. This selection enables a systematic comparison of how central directives manifest across differing local contexts.

Primary empirical materials comprise publicly available official documents (central white papers, State Council directives, local regulations on ethnic affairs, education, and language), central and regional media outputs (including authoritative sources such as People's Daily, Xinhua, and regional press), state propaganda artefacts (posters, promotional videos), and curriculum materials illustrating language teaching policies and textbook content. Secondary sources encompass prior relevant literature, policy analyses (particularly studies by Ma Rong, Leibold, and Elliott), statistical yearbooks, and

published field survey findings. Controlled online discourse from state media platforms is cautiously employed to gauge circulating narratives and semantic shifts, always triangulated with formal publications and academic reporting.

Analytically, the research proceeds along three interrelated tracks. Firstly, qualitative discourse analysis systematically codes shift in terminology and framing within policy texts and media narratives. The categorisation of codes distinguishes between “depoliticised” frameworks and securitised or politicised frameworks. The former refers to redefining the concept of ethnicity from cultural, educational or economic perspectives (e.g., “integration”, “Chinese national community”, “cultural heritage”), while the latter encompasses concepts such as “stability maintenance” and “separatism”. The chronological sequencing of discourse facilitates assessment of whether and when rhetorical emphasis shifted from the political to the cultural sphere. Secondly, institutional analysis employs process tracing to chart policy trajectories from central announcements to local implementation, documenting specific administrative and legal alterations: revisions to autonomy regulations, changes to language teaching hours, restructuring of Ethnic Affairs Bureaus, and modifications to quota or examination systems. By identifying key policy nodes and implementation mechanisms, this section assesses whether the formal institutional capacity for ethnic self-governance has been constrained, reconfigured, or preserved. Thirdly, comparative synthesis integrates discursive and institutional findings from the cases, revealing patterns of convergence and divergence. This comparison tests a core hypothesis: that depoliticisation at the discursive level can coexist with, or even enable, institutional reaffirmations of central control.

Operationalisation entails clarity. Depoliticisation is achieved through measurable indicators: the relative frequency and contextual placement of coded keywords within policy and media corpora; semantic shifts from legal/political to cultural/educational vocabulary; and documented reductions in statutory language safeguarding collective rights or autonomy. Institutional repoliticisation is measured through demonstrable administrative actions, such as amendments to local legal texts, reductions in minority language teaching hours documented in curricula and yearbooks, and observable governance body reorganisations. Significance is assessed through triangulation: consistent evidence from multiple data sources strengthens inferential claims, while inconsistent signals prompt further process tracing to resolve mechanistic interpretations.

Validity and reliability are addressed through methodological triangulation, transparent coding protocols, and detailed source documentation. Cross-case comparisons serve as an internal validity check; if similar discursive shifts yield divergent institutional outcomes across contexts, this supports causal inferences regarding interactive variables such as governance intensity. Generalisability is conceptual rather than statistical. This study aims to generate transferable theoretical insights into how state discourses and institutional practices interact within authoritarian multiethnic governance, rather than broad demographic estimates.

Given access restrictions, this study deliberately utilised only publicly available materials to ensure replicability and security. Whilst acknowledging that this limits certain forms of evidence, it provides a foundation for analysing observable discourses and institutional change.

4 Case Studies and Analysis (Integrating Anticipated Findings)

Three case studies, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, demonstrate how second-generation minzu policies produce differentiated configurations of discursive depoliticisation and institutional repoliticisation across regions with varying degrees of governance intensity and historical legacies.

Xinjiang exemplifies the convergence of discursive depoliticisation with intense securitisation and institutional repoliticisation. State narratives reconstruct governance frameworks through technical and environmental terminology such as ‘ecological civilisation’ (Salimjan, G., 2021)^[13], thereby depoliticising coercive practices. This discursive shift both propels and obscures extensive institutional interventions, including surveillance expansion and administrative centralisation. Records of policy implementation reveal how the depoliticisation of counter-extremist discourse has reconfigured state-society relations towards a security-oriented framework (Financial Times, 2025)^[14].

Tibet exhibits a pattern where symbolic, depoliticised governance coexists with the weakening of autonomous institutions. Official discourse emphasises cultural preservation, yet empirical research reveals contradictions within these efforts, including the marginalisation of traditional institutions and the increasing influence of Han cadres in local governance. (Kaul, K., 2024; Terrone, A., 2016)^[15-16]. Within this context, depoliticisation stifles political debate, while administrative reforms progressively curtail substantive autonomy without dismantling its formal framework.

Inner Mongolia has demonstrated a more nuanced path of depoliticisation through its cultural-linguistic policies. Contemporary ethnographic research no longer views these policies merely as top-down directives, but rather as catalysts for complex daily identity negotiations. Within this negotiation, Mongolian students must judiciously balance their loyalty to their native language with the pragmatic pursuit of linguistic capital embodied by Mandarin (Ai, D., 2023)^[3]. These recent bilingual education reforms have prioritised Mandarin instruction under the banner of “standardisation” and integration (Atwood, C.P., 2020)^[7]. These reforms, packaged as pedagogical improvements, have resulted in a significant reduction in Mongolian language teaching, advancing assimilation through institutionalised educational practices.

Collectively, these cases demonstrate that depoliticisation within contemporary Chinese ethnic governance does not signify political retreat, but rather a strategic reconfiguration of power structures. This reconfiguration gains legitimacy through depoliticised discourse while being implemented through repoliticised institutions.

5 Expected Findings and Contributions

Through methodological triangulation based on discourse and institutional analysis across three case studies, this analysis is anticipated to robustly support Hypothesis H1: that since the 2010s, a discernible shift in discourse has emerged within central policy documents and official media. The relative frequency and prominence of terms emphasising political differentiation and collective rights (such as ‘minzu regional autonomy’

and 'ethnic rights') are projected to decline. These terms will be systematically supplanted by depoliticised vocabulary promoting ethnic integration (e.g., 'Chinese national community,' 'ethnic exchanges and interactions') and practices repackaging cultural customs as 'intangible cultural heritage.' This depoliticisation of discourse facilitates the reconfiguration of ethnicity from a potentially contentious political domain into a manageable sphere of cultural differentiation and technical governance.

Concurrently, this study anticipates confirming another hypothesis, H2, revealing that this discursive shift operates in parallel with institutional repoliticisation, often facilitating it. In practice, this manifests as a substantial erosion of substantive autonomy. The findings are expected to reflect the following: a marked reduction in teaching hours and curriculum allocation for minority languages, particularly in Inner Mongolia. Concurrently, Tibet and Xinjiang witness intensified administrative control over religious institutions and cultural expressions, frequently justified under depoliticised guises such as 'standardisation' or 'modernisation.' Adjustments to local governance structures further strengthen the central government's vertical control, thereby subtly marginalising formal institutions of ethnic autonomy. This institutional repoliticisation embeds state power more deeply within the fabric of ethnic minority life, despite public discourse minimising the political salience of ethnicity.

Theoretically, this study seeks to transcend the binary debate over whether China's ethnic policies represent depoliticisation or assimilation. By conceptualising the 'second-generation transformation' as a dual process of discursive depoliticisation and institutional repoliticisation, it offers a more nuanced framework for understanding how authoritarian states reconfigure governance. It advances the theorisation of depoliticisation not as state withdrawal, but as a complex strategy for reconcentrating power by altering the conditions of political participation. This shifts contention from the public political sphere to administrative and cultural domains where assertions of state primacy carry greater weight.

From an empirical perspective, this allows for a more nuanced comparative understanding of the diverse implementation of state policies. By contrasting securitised governance in Xinjiang and Tibet with cultural-linguistic assimilation in Inner Mongolia, it elucidates how a unified central discourse adapts to local contexts, thereby generating divergent paths of "depoliticisation-repoliticisation". This comparative lens reveals that the intensity of institutional repoliticisation often negatively correlates with perceived security threats. In 'less volatile' regions like Inner Mongolia, the erosion of cultural infrastructure through policy measures proceeds slowly yet steadily.

The findings highlight a critical policy paradox: state efforts to promote integration and stability may inadvertently exacerbate ethnic minorities' perceptions of cultural threat and marginalisation. Policies that verbally champion diversity while institutionally restricting its expression risk transforming integration objectives into sources of resentment, posing long-term challenges to social cohesion and governance legitimacy in ethnic regions.

6 Potential Challenges, Ethical Issues and Feasibility

Research into China's ethnic policies faces constraints on information access, rendering fieldwork and archival consultation challenging. Reliance on publicly available materials limits research depth but enhances security and replicability, while cross-validation with academic studies compensates for blind spots. Given the political sensitivity, caution is required throughout the research process to avoid oversimplification. Consequently, this study focuses on observable discourse and institutional shifts, grounding assertions in textual and policy evidence. Ethical safeguards include utilising only macro-level publicly available data, avoiding identification of individual identities, and maintaining balanced academic presentation.

7 Conclusion

In summary, this paper contends that China's 'second-generation minzu policy' represents a complex reconfiguration of state-minority relations: a discourse-level depoliticisation that frequently coincides with a re-politicisation at the institutional level. This dual dynamic enables the re-centralisation of state power while simultaneously eroding substantive autonomy, generating tensions between proclaimed integration objectives and minority perceptions of marginalisation. In theory, this study redefines depoliticisation as a governance strategy rather than political retreat. By shifting the arena of contention from public politics to administrative and cultural spheres, authoritarian states can re-establish control while claiming neutrality. This conceptual reframing offers valuable insights into authoritarian governance and national politics, providing a framework applicable to other multi-ethnic regimes governed through securitisation. The policy implications are clear: rhetoric of superficial integration may mask reforms that erode substantive pluralism, thereby undermining long-term legitimacy.

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