Many scholars perceive ethnic politics in China as an untouchable topic due to lack of data and contentious, even prohibitive, politics. This book fills a gap in the literature, offering a historical-political perspective on China’s contemporary ethnic conflict. Yan Sun accumulates research via field trips, local reports, and policy debates to reveal rare knowledge and findings. Her long-time causal chain of explanation reveals the roots of China’s contemporary ethnic strife in the centralizing and ethnicizing strategies of its incomplete transition to a nation state – strategies that depart sharply from its historical patterns of diverse and indirect rule. This departure created the institutional dynamics for politicized identities and ethnic mobilization, particularly in the outer regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. In the twenty-first century, such factors as the demise of socialist tenets and institutions that upheld interethnic solidarity, and the rise of identity politics and developmentalism, have intensified these built-in tensions.

Yan Sun is Professor in the Department in Political Science at Queens College and at the Graduate Centre, The City University of New York.
To my father, Sun Zhixiang

October 11, 1933–June 23, 2019

Distinguished Professor of Russian Language
# Contents

*List of Figures and Tables*  
*page viii*

*Acknowledgments*  
*x*

**Introduction: What Is Destabilizing about China’s Ethnic Regions?**  
1 Changing Approaches to Identity: From Maintenance to Transformation  
2 Changing Approaches to Ethnic Governance: From Loose Rein to Ethno-territorialism  
3 Changing Approaches to Policy Instruments: From Elite Co-optation to Egalitarian Strategies  
4 The Rise of Identity Politics in Post-Mao China  
5 Ethnic Autonomy and Its Discontents  
6 Religious Revival and Its Discontents  
7 Economic Modernization and Its Discontents  
8 Educational Expansion and Its Discontents  
**Conclusion: From Empire to Nation State: Lessons and Reforms**  
297

*Bibliography*  
318

*Index*  
352
Figures and Tables

Figures
6.1 Poster: “Five Unusual Practices” banned in public facilities  page 191
7.1 Share of state subsidy in the total revenues of autonomous regions  219

Tables
1.1 Historical transition of China’s ethnic governance: from empire to the post-Mao era  10
2.1 Shares of Han population in five autonomous regions (%)  61
3.1 Financial subsidies for autonomous regions in the Mao era  85
3.2 Tax relief for minority regions in the Mao era  86
3.3 Han vs. minority population: annual growth rates  88
3.4 Han vs. minority in total population in five national censuses  88
3.5 Educational achievement of fourteen ethnic groups above age 6 (2000)  90
3.6 Government revenues of the TAR during the Mao era, 1952–85  97
4.1 Central decrees sanctioning religious revival: early post-Mao China  104
4.2 Xinjiang’s decrees to promote religious revival: early post-Mao China  119
6.1 Onset of violence in Xinjiang: the early 1990s  166
6.2 Assassination of Uighur officials and imams: the 1990s  167
6.3 Xinjiang’s decrees to curtail illegal religious activities: the 1990s  171
6.4 Central decrees to curtail illegal religious activities: the 1990s  172
6.5 Spread of violence in Xinjiang: the 2000s  177
6.6 Xinjiang’s decrees to define illegal religious activities: early 2010s  184
6.7 Escalation of violence in Xinjiang, late 2009 to mid-2014  186
Figures and Tables

6.8 Xinjiang’s decrees to combat religious extremism: mid-2010s 190
6.9 Escalation of violence in Xinjiang: mid-2014 to 2015 194
6.10 Xinjiang’s decrees to combat radicalization: late 2010s 198
6.11 Waning of violence in Xinjiang: late 2016 to 2017 199
6.12 Central and regional decrees to regulate religion in Tibet 204
7.1 Fiscal subsidies and modernization drive for ethnic regions: since the late 1970s 218
7.2 Minority education/employment and modernization drive: since the late 1970s 220
7.3 Anti-poverty and modernization drive for ethnic regions: since the early 1980s 220
7.4 Partner assistance and development of western regions: since the late 1990s 221
7.5 Development initiatives for western regions: since the late 1990s 221
7.6 Population growth of ethnic groups: 1982–2000 231
7.7 Provinces with the highest migration rates: 1995–2000 249
8.1 Percentage of college graduates in total population over age six by ethnic group 265
8.2 NCEE cut-off points for college admissions in Xinjiang: 2002–19 276
8.3 Bonus points by ethnic group in college admissions in Xinjiang 278
8.4 Results of high-school admission tests in Urumqi: 2003–5 280
8.5 Minority enrollment in colleges and specialized schools: 2000 and 2013 283
Acknowledgments

This book represents almost a decade of work since I first became interested in the topic of China’s ethnic politics in the wake of the Lhasa riot of March 2008 and the Urumqi riot of 2009. It is an accumulation of extensive field trips, conversations, and archival research in different regions of China. Ethnic politics is such a politically sensitive topic in China that few foreign (especially US) based scholars may be willing to undertake a project like this, for a lack of local access in China. Thus, I wish to thank the hundreds of people across China who have shared their time and knowledge to help me understand a highly delicate subject. Without them, this project would not have been possible, either physically or intellectually.

For introducing me to research resources, contacts, and trips in minority regions in China, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor Ma Rong of Beijing University, Professor Yang Minghong of Sichuan University, Mr. Ming Hao of the research office of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC), and Mr. Rigzin Losel of the Tibetology Center of China. They are among the many scholars and policy analysts whom I have met at conferences on minority issues in China. Between them they represent four different ethnicities and diverse perspectives on China’s ethnic policy. Professor Ma first introduced me to Xinjiang in the early 2010s by bringing me to two conferences in Xinjiang and then on field trips with his research team across southern Xinjiang. He also introduced me to a forum of ethnic scholars in Qinghai, a heavily multiethnic province. Professor Yang, during three summers between 2014 and 2017, brought me along with his research teams on field trips in Tibetan prefectures of Sichuan and several prefectures in Tibet itself. Mr. Ming Hao introduced me to several forums on minority issues in China, and through his assistance I was able to take field trips in Yanbian, a Korean autonomous prefecture. Mr. Losel, a Tibetan historian, introduced me to many aspects of intraelite politics in Tibetan history and local politics in contemporary Tibetan communities. Throughout my project I have benefited
Acknowledgments

greatly from their local knowledge, their generosity to answer my questions, and their assistance with local access and resources.

For intellectual guidance and support, I owe enormous debts to Professor Dingxin Zhao of the University of Chicago and my colleague at CUNY, Professor Lenny Markovitz. Professor Zhao’s astute knowledge of historical empires, and of Chinese political and social institutions both historically and in contemporary times, helped to sharpen my conceptual framework and empirical analyses. Despite his busy schedules between Chicago and Hangzhou, he took time to make informed and constructive comments throughout the entire manuscript. I am also grateful to him for opportunities to present parts of my project at the East Asia Forum at the University of Chicago and the western development symposium at Zhejiang University. Professor Markovitz, my long-time colleague at CUNY, has given me much moral and intellectual support throughout my career. He took time to read and comment on the entire manuscript. As co-editor for the Journal of Comparative Politics for decades, he has a knack for critical insights and valuable feedback. Without the encouragement and wisdom of these two professional colleagues, I may not have had the confidence to carry to completion a study whose subject matter can seem too contentious to handle with balance, dispassion, and patience. In addition, I am grateful to Dr. Andrew Mertha, previously at Cornell University and now at Johns Hopkins University, for reading my entire manuscript and offering constructive comments. In this connection, I also thank the anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press, whose criticisms and corrections helped to improve my manuscript.

For assisting me in local accommodation, travel, and research, I am indebted to many relatives in southern Xinjiang. Given the current political climate in the region, it is prudent to mention just three who would unlikely face any risk for having hosted a foreign-based relative/researcher. My cousin Ling, who passed away in 2017 at the age of forty-eight, was an agricultural specialist who worked with Uighur farmers throughout his career in a rural county of the Uighur south. My cousin Ping, unemployed since the late 1990s, introduced me to her world of downsized workers from local state factories. Finally, her husband Yong, who passed away in 2017 at the age of fifty-eight, was a staff member in a local government with rich knowledge of local politics. I benefited greatly from staying with them, joining in and observing their daily activities, interacting with their local communities, and visiting places which I could not have done otherwise. Born locally, their fluency in spoken Uighur gave me the necessary tools for local communication. I am also grateful to two other local cousins in whose homes I stayed, and to these and other relatives whose local knowledge and experiences have remained a source of reality checking for me.

Other people who have given me various forms of support deserve my sincere appreciation. Patricia Rachal, my chair at Queens College, has unfailingly supported my research project with schedules and course loads that afforded me the time and environment to complete my project. Andrew Hacker, my
senior colleague at Queens College, has been supportive with his deep interest in ethnic politics and his role model as a productive scholar. Ruth O’Brien, my colleague at the CUNY Graduate Center, has supported me with her continuing interest in my project and her readiness to help. Professor Yang Yang of Yunnan University provided valuable assistance in compiling economic data for the autonomous regions. Dr. Ma Bo, my doctoral student, provided assistance in turning the economic data into graphs. Dr. Hu Shaohua, of Wagner College, read parts of my earlier draft and offered comments. Ms. Shen Wenjin, my former editor at the Chinese magazine Lingdazhe, invited me to a volunteer project in the Tibetan village of Diqing, a Tibetan prefecture in Yunnan province, where I interacted with local Tibetan students up close. I thank two scholars at the Minzu University of China; one invited me to the campus for a week and the other facilitated an interview with a dissident Uighur faculty member. I thank my friend Faye Maris for her moral support and tolerance of my absence.

At Cambridge University Press, my sincere appreciation goes to Senior Editor Robert Dreesan and retired Senior Editor Lewis Bateman, for their interest in my project and their editorial advice. My thanks also go to Editorial Assistant Erika Walsh and Content Manager Catherine Smith for their efficiency and assistance in the production of the book. My thanks also go to the fine work of Project Manager Podhumai Anban at Integra Software Services, Copy-Editor Dan Harding, and Indexer Jim Diggins. I especially thank Dan Harding for his superb work cleaning up the manuscript.

For providing resources to help in the research and writing of this study, I gratefully acknowledge two grants from the PSC-CUNY Research Foundation and one grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange.


For my education in the English language and political science, I thank three great institutions of higher education. At Nanjing University and Foreign Affairs College in Beijing, where I majored in English, the foreign language faculty eagerly taught the first group of students since the college entrance exams resumed in China in the late 1970s. At Johns Hopkins University, where I pursued my doctoral study in political science, I am grateful to my mentors Drs. Germaine A. Hoston and William T. Rowe, as well as Drs. Richard S. Katz and Steven David in the Political Science Department. As one of the early graduate students from post-Mao China who had no prior exposure to Western social sciences, I benefited greatly from their welcoming attitude, their patience with my novitiate, their stimulating seminars, and most of all their intellectual guidance.
Acknowledgments

A special note of appreciation goes to my family. My parents, retired college professors in Chongqing, worried about me going to “unstable” minority regions but appreciated and supported my research pursuits. My children Ben and Kenny, and my husband Gang, tolerated my summer absences and one sabbatical absence as I carried out this research project. To them all is this book dedicated, but especially to my father, who passed away in the middle of my final preparation for the manuscript, in June 2019.