



Indigenous Peoples



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Ethnic disparities in China: geography, rurality, and socioeconomic welfare

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China has 55 official minority groups. Together, they constitute over 8 percent of the population, according to the 2000 census. The term “minority” is not synonymous with the term “indigenous”: in China some subgroups of the majority population meet international definitions of indigenous peoples, while some ethnic minority populations do not. Ethnic minority groups are diverse in history, culture, language, and socioeconomic circumstances. Some groups enjoy social and economic advantage compared with the majority Han population, but many others are highly vulnerable to poverty. Thus, on the whole, ethnic minority groups are disadvantaged. This brief discusses the average socioeconomic circumstances among ethnic minorities and illustrates the diversity among ethnic minorities with examples from the five largest groups—the Hui, Manchu, Miao (Hmong), Uygur, and Zhuang.

Ethnic minorities are most heavily represented in the northeast, central-south to south-west, and northwest. Many live in regions that are among the poorest in terms of rural household income. While some groups, such as the Hui and Manchus, are highly urbanized, ethnic minorities in general are less urbanized than the majority Han population—important because household income per capita in urban areas is more than 2.5 times that in rural areas.

Despite falling poverty rates, ethnic minorities are still more likely to be poor. According to data on rural households from the 2002

Chinese Household Income Project, minorities were 1.5–2 times as likely as their Han counterparts, a multiplier that would probably be larger if urban areas were included. About a third of ethnic minority villages sampled were in nationally designated poor counties, compared with about a fifth of nonminority villages. Rural minorities have less access to wage employment and receive lower wages than rural Han. Household income is also lower among rural ethnic minorities. Children are especially affected—more than 1 child in 10 from a rural minority household lived below the official poverty line, compared with about 1 in 25 from a rural Han household—and the household income of rural minority children was just under two-thirds that of rural Han household children.

Access to education has expanded across the board in recent decades, but significant attainment and enrollment differences by ethnic group persist. Illiteracy rates among a few ethnic minority groups are similar to or lower than those among the Han, but illiteracy is substantially higher among many others. Over the last 15 years exclusion from compulsory education among minority youth has fallen dramatically, but the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities among excluded youth has intensified.

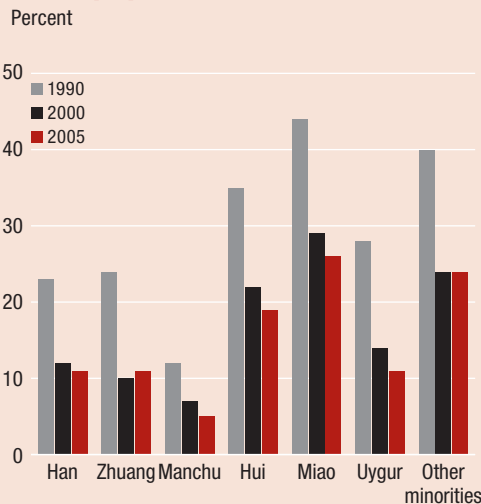
Rural villages in minority areas, on average, have less developed health care infrastructure, consistent with findings from several localized

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FIGURE 1

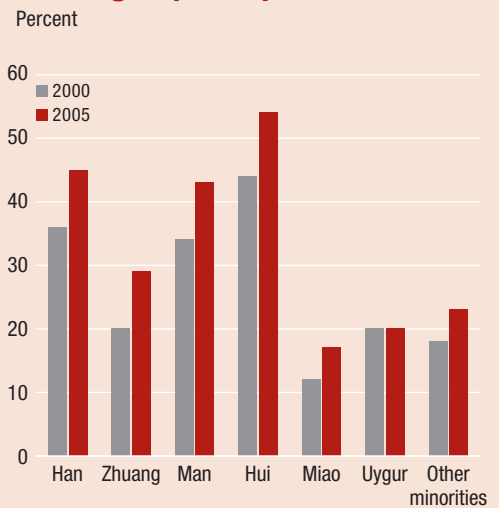
National percent illiterate by ethnic group and year, adult population



Source: 1990 and 2000 Census Public Use Micro-Samples; 2005 Mini-Census.

FIGURE 2

Urbanization rate by ethnic group and year



Note: Definition of *urban* is that in operation at the time of the census or survey.

Source: 2000 Census Microsample and 2005 Mid-censal Survey.

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studies showing problematic maternal and child health care access for some rural minority groups. More research is needed on a national scale.

Geography is important in patterns of ethnic advantage and disadvantage. More urbanized ethnic minority groups and groups not concentrated in poor regions tend to experience smaller or no disadvantages compared with the Han population. More rural ethnic minority groups have less access to education and social safety nets—unemployment and pension insurance—than do the more urbanized Han, Hui, and Manchu. School enrollment gaps are smaller in urban areas. Health insurance quality is also tied to location. Within rural areas the Manchu, Miao, and Zhuang have low access to health insurance—just 1 member of the Miao group in 10 reports access.

Overall, Han-minority disparities across social welfare outcomes diminish sharply when geographic differences are taken into account, suggesting that many gaps that appear as cross-ethnic differences are due to differences in regional development. Considering the disadvantaged contexts in which many rural members of ethnic minorities reside,

BOX 1

Caveats for estimates of majority-minority disparities in poverty

Poverty estimates are based on data from the 2002 Rural Chinese Household Income Project (CHIP) and are for rural areas only because China does not have an official urban poverty line. Majority-minority poverty gaps would likely be larger if poverty were calculated on a national basis, because minorities are more likely to live in impoverished rural areas. The CHIP is the only publicly available data source with reasonable coverage of minority areas and comprehensive measures of household income, but it did not cover some significant minority autonomous regions. If these minority areas are much poorer than those included in the CHIP sample, or if the poorest households in general were undersampled, then minority-majority income and poverty gaps are underestimated. There is a dire need for better data to support research on the scale of ethnic disparities in poverty in China.

poverty alleviation efforts to improve education and health will be most effective if paired with strategies to improve community infrastructure and the environment for economic activity.