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China's peripheries: the cases of Tibet and Xinjiang

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Abstract

China is a country the size of a continent and correspondingly heterogeneous. A detailed examination must therefore differentiate between different regions. In China, the East-West divide is particularly glaring in many respects. While reports about the more developed East coast often dominate the media, other parts of the country tend to be overlooked. This chapter therefore focuses on the more marginalized regions. After a definition of terms and an introduction, the economic importance of the periphery and its political role is discussed. This article takes a closer look at two particularly controversial cases: Tibet and Xinjiang.

Keywords

China, Xinjiang, Tibet, economic development, ethnic identity

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Plain language summary

China's major ethnic minority regions are at the same time its borderlands. Therefore, maintaining political control over these far-flung areas has long been a political priority for the People's Republic of China (PRC) government. This article analyzes the dynamics between center and periphery in the two prominent cases of Xinjiang and Tibet.

What is the "periphery"?

Peripheries are marginal zones, each defined from a center. In this respect, center and periphery always create and condition each other. Thus, they are relational and not absolute, and understandings of what is central or peripheral are subject to change. Moreover, such a status can also be contested. Kashgar, for example, in the far west of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and about 4,000 km from its capital Beijing, is understood to be peripheral to the Sinosphere. At the same time however, Kashgar is culturally located on the periphery of the Muslim world: the distance from Baghdad, for example, is only about 3,000km. Simultaneously, Kashgar represents the center of the Uyghur ethnic group's own culture (Hoppe, 1998: 141f). Such overlaps and contradictions must be considered when talking about China's peripheries.

What counts as the periphery can be understood historically, economically, politically, and culturally, and these dimensions often complement one another. Historically, the center of China can be described as the regions south of the Great Wall, where the predominantly agricultural Han Chinese people lived, wanting to separate and protect themselves from the neighboring nomadic peoples north of the wall. From time immemorial, the predominantly pastoralist peoples of the north posed a threat to the sedentary Han Chinese. Only the Manchurian Qing dynasty solved this problem by unifying Mongolia and the Han Chinese-populated areas under its rule, but still administering them separately (Bulag, 2012). It also expanded its dominion westward, eventually subjugating what is now Xinjiang in 1759 (Perdue, 2005).

The area south of this cultural boundary is traditionally referred to in Chinese as the "*inner land*" (*neidi*内地), which comprised 18 provinces during the last imperial dynasty (Qing 1644-1911) (Billé, 2012: 26). In English, the term "China proper" has also become common, although it is now considered improper by PRC authorities. Over the centuries, this center expanded further and further south of the Yellow River (*huanghe*) due to population growth and migration. Other ethnic groups already living there were often displaced from better farmland and had to move, either further south, or into mountainous regions. The demarcation in the southern part of the country is therefore much more blurred than in the north. In general, however, the socio-cultural characteristics of the less developed provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, as well as the Zhuang Guangxi Autonomous Region, can be counted as peripheral, in which high percentages of the local population still belong to ethnic groups other than the Han.

The regions north and west of the Great Wall were initially deliberately administered separately from Inner China as a "border region" (*bianjiang*边疆) under the Qing dynasty, and Han-Chinese migration there was strictly controlled. Only toward the end of the dynasty were these rules relaxed or simply no longer enforced (Bulag, 2012). In each case, in response to the advance of European colonial powers, the imperial court attempted to integrate the regions on the periphery of the Qing Empire into the established administrative system consisting of provinces and counties. In Xinjiang, one such change was triggered by the Russian occupation of the Yili Valley (1871–1881) in the north, which took advantage of a revolt by the local Muslim population (1864–1877). Both led to the western region (*xiyu*西域) being transformed into Xinjiang Province (新疆, literally "New Frontier") in 1884 with the goal of greater integration and control. Similarly, the Qing government responded to campaigns by Japan in 1874 and France in 1884 against the island of Taiwan by elevating it to the status of an independent province in 1887. This did not prevent it from being colonized by Japan, however, after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 (Gardella, 2007). The 1904–1905 campaign by British-Indian troops, who briefly occupied the Tibetan capital Lhasa, was similarly met with military and administrative reforms by the Qing, seeking to secure their rule over Tibetan-populated areas. The Qing empire forcibly occupied eastern Tibet (part of the Tibetan region of Kham, present-day western Sichuan) in 1910 and established it as Xikang province, before taking Lhasa itself. However, the Qing monarchy collapsed one year later in the Xinhai Revolution, and Tibet declared itself independent under the 13th Dalai Lama.[1] Although the border in Kham remained contested for decades, central Tibet maintained independence until the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded in 1950. However, neither China's central government nor any other countries recognized the Tibetan government as sovereign and independent (Goldstein, 1989). There were also two short-lived attempts to establish an independent "Republic of East Turkestan" in parts of the then Xinjiang province during the Republic of China period (1912–1949): in Kashgar in 1933–1934 and in the north of the region in 1944–1949 (Yili Rebellion), which also ended with the invasion of the PLA (Alpermann, 2021). The history of Mongolia was different, with the northern region ("Outer Mongolia") declaring independence as early as 1911 with the collapse of Qing rule, but forfeiting this status in 1915 (Bulag, 2012: 45). It was not until 1924, with the founding of the Mongolian People's Republic, which was strongly under Soviet influence, that independence was renewed. This was also recognized by China in 1946. By contrast, the southern region known as Inner Mongolia (*nei menggu*) always remained formally part of China. It was constituted on May 1, 1947 - a good two years before the founding of the PRC - as an "autonomous region" with the rank of a province. The minority areas of Xinjiang (1955), Guangxi, Ningxia (both 1958) and Tibet (1965) were also later given this status. The geographical

[1] The flag of the Wuchang Uprising of 10.10.1911 shows eighteen stars, a symbol for the inner Chinese provinces. It was not until 1912 that a new national flag was introduced, with five colors representing the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan and Muslim ethnic groups (Bulag, 2012: 45).

configuration of Inner Mongolia changed several times, not only during the Republican period but also under the PRC.

In northeastern Manchuria, it was the advance of rivals Russia and Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that triggered similar reactions. With its victory over Russia in 1904–1905, Japan asserted itself as an imperialist power. In 1907, Manchuria was transformed into the three provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Fengtian (modern Liaoning), and the subsequent influx of Han Chinese led to widespread demographic shifts. From 1932 to 1945, the area was formally separated from the Republic of China as the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. After the conclusion of the Second World War, Manchukuo was dissolved, and the northern regions were returned to China under the PRC. In its first decades after coming to power, the People's Republic developed the Northeast into the most important heavy industrial base in China, due to its extensive resources and supply of raw materials. Subsequent urbanization due to industrialization proceeded apace. In 2020, the urbanization rate in the Northeast was nearly four percentage points higher than the national rate, and significantly higher than most peripheral areas.[2]

At the same time, Manchurians living in the PRC assimilated with the Han Chinese during the 20th century, who today make up over 90% of the population living in the Northeast. Due to these developments, northeast China is no longer considered a periphery, despite its border location.

The economic importance of the periphery

In the late imperial period, the vast territories of Mongolia possessed primarily strategic importance. The region provided pastures that were lacking in the Inner Chinese regions, along with land for the breeding of horses needed for the military. Already in the Ming period (1368–1644), the Chinese state depended on trade with Mongolian nomads, who were primarily interested in tea, agricultural products, and luxury goods (Perdue, 2005: 33ff, 68ff). Holding the western region was strategically important, but consistently a burden on the Qing treasury, although attempts were made to reduce this (Millward, 1998). In Tibet, the Qing dynasty was also content, for reasons of cost, with indirect (sometimes only symbolic) rule, exercised through two high officials (Manch. *amban*) and a small military force dispatched to Lhasa (van Schaik, 2011). In general, these peripheries were perceived as "wastelands" (*huang*荒), even though they formed the basis of the nomadic pastoralist economy. However, this was considered inferior from the Han Chinese perspective, both economically and morally (Schluessel, 2020). Attempts to develop agriculture, and at the same time secure the borders by settling Han people there, proved difficult and often ended in failure.

It was not until the end of the 19th century, when the colonial powers of Europe and Japan began to encroach upon China's peripheries, in part to secure natural resources, that Qing officials discovered the value of mineral resources in these regions. The government then began to extract these resources, sometimes in collaboration with foreign partners, laying the groundwork for long-term trends in regional development (Kinzley, 2018). These continued after the founding of the PRC, with, for example, the heavy industrial base that had been established under Japanese occupation in the Northeast, subsequently further expanded with Soviet assistance. In the spirit of Maoist ideology, the "wasteland" was seen as a test of the people's will to create the natural foundations of the economy themselves - by discovering mineral resources as well as by converting "unused" (pasture) land into arable land. Between 1962 and 1979, approximately 1.4 million young people from eastern China were sent to the border regions of Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Yunnan alone (Scharping, 1981). Many of those resettled attempted to return home after the end of the Mao era, though not all succeeded due to strict residency rules (Xu, 2022). In any case, campaigns for land reclamation left behind lasting changes in social and economic structures. In some cases, these campaigns destroyed the natural foundations of the economy rather than developing them, for example when pastureland unsuitable for agriculture was converted into farmland, which was then eroded (Rohlf, 2003; White, 2016). The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps played a particularly important role in this process, holding a dominant position in agriculture in this region to this day and encouraging the influx of Han Chinese (Neddermann, 2010; Zhu & Blachford, 2016).

Moreover, as part of the Third Front strategy of the 1960s and 1970s, strategically important production sectors were relocated to the hinterland and rail links were built to these sites (Joniak-Lüthi & Bulag, 2016: 7; Lin *et al.*, 2019: 510ff). Thus, centers of heavy industry and resource extraction emerged in the hinterland without broader economic spillover to their surroundings. During the reform era starting in the late 1970s, the western regions fell further and further behind compared with eastern China, with the former industrial boom cities among the largest losers (Woodworth, 2016). The hoped for 'trickle-down' effect from prosperous regions to the interior did not occur. Instead, the central government was forced to launch a special development policy around the year 2000: the "Great Development of the West" (*Xibu da kaifa*西部大开发), which was intended to enable the economic growth of the hinterland to catch-up with that of the East, through extensive infrastructure investment (Holbig, 2004).

The development gap, however, has been mitigated only to a limited extent. This is also due to the low prices for raw materials extracted in western regions, which are set by the state, and which systematically disadvantage these regions, and thus indirectly subsidize other parts of the country (Grewal & Ahmed, 2011; Woodworth, 2016). Such economic relations are typical of the relationship between the center and peripheries. The Xinjiang region, for example, increased its output of

[2] There are different ways to calculate the urbanization rate. Here, it is formed from the data of the last census at the end of 2020 by adding the population figures for cities (*chengshi*) and small towns (*zhen*) and placing them in relation to the total population (cities, small towns, and rural areas or *xiangcun*).

energy resources five-fold in the twenty years since the turn of the millennium. Coal accounted for by far the largest share, at around 60% in 2019. Even though renewables grew the most, they still account for less than 10% of power generation. Oil production, which still dominated the energy mix with almost 50% in 2000, has since fallen to below 15%, and has now just been surpassed by natural gas. Most importantly, the significance of these two energy sources for export to other regions has reversed: in 2000, more than 70% of petroleum was exported; in 2019, this was about the same proportion of natural gas produced (Xinjiang Tongji Nianjian, 2021: Tabs. 47.1, 47.2; own calculations). Xinjiang covers just under one-fifth of China's natural gas production in total, the highest share of any unit at the provincial level. Resource-based economies in cities such as Karamay in Xinjiang or Ordos in Inner Mongolia have thus achieved per capita GDP values about twice that of Beijing in 2013 (Woodworth, 2016: 111). Thus, newly booming cities have emerged in the western region, again based on resource extraction, from which primarily Han Chinese benefit however (Cliff, 2016). Other ethnic groups are also disproportionately affected by poverty. The fundamental economic importance of the periphery as a supplier of resources is not adequately reflected by its small share of China's overall GDP. However, this does not apply equally to all peripheral areas. For example, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is home to various raw material deposits, though the economic viability of their exploitation is limited by difficult mining conditions (Lafitte, 2013).

Table 1 shows the peripheral areas of China discussed here, ranked by the absolute size of their ethnic minority populations. Over 60 % of China's minority members live in these areas, but their share of the respective population at the provincial level varies widely. Northwestern Gansu, one of the eighteen provinces traditionally considered internal to China, is included here as a comparative case. The proportion of minorities there is significantly lower, at just under 11%, but their absolute number exceeds the corresponding figure for the neighboring Hui Ningxia Autonomous Region. Neither the historical nor the current administrative classification of these provinces should therefore be made absolute. At the same time, Gansu shows that developmental deficits are by no means limited to minority regions or traditional peripheries, even if social perception and political discourse often equate poverty with ethnicity (Barabantseva, 2008).[3] In terms of both economic strength (measured in GDP per capita) and disposable income, Gansu lags significantly behind the regions with the second-lowest values, Tibet and Guangxi, respectively.

With the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also known as the New Silk Road Initiative) proclaimed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the western peripheral regions are being given a new focus. Peripheries are now moving to the center stage, as hubs of international trade in goods (Mayer & Zhang, 2021; Rippa, 2020: 25). At its core, the BRI is about trade facilitation, the expansion of road and rail links, and other infrastructure (Griffiths, 2019; Ploberger, 2020). Although motivations for the BRI are many, two strategic objectives can be considered

[3] This is also shown by the fact that the area of the "Great Development of the West" also includes autonomous governmental districts that are located in the very east of China (Yanbian in Jilin and Ganzhou in Jiangxi). Their attribution to this development program is based on this special ethnic status.

Table 1. Socio-economic data on the periphery.

Province/ region	Total population (2020)	Ethnic minority population (2020)	Share of ethnic minority population in total provincial population	Regional GDP/ capita in relation to national average GDP/ capita (2020)	Disposable income/capita in relation to national average disposable income (2020)	Share in national GDP (2020)	Rate of urbanization
Guangxi	50,126,804	18,807,980	37.5%	61.5%	76.3%	2.2%	52.2%
Yunnan	47,209,277	15,636,032	33.1%	72.2%	72.4%	2.4%	35.7%
Xinjiang	25,852,345	14,932,247	57.8%	74.4%	74.1%	1.4%	53.2%
Guizhou	38,562,148	14,050,266	36.4%	64.3%	67.7%	1.8%	50.1%
Inner Mongolia	24,049,155	5,113,618	21.3%	100.1%	97.9%	1.7%	56.5%
Tibet	3,648,100	3,204,730	87.8%	72.7%	67.6%	0.2%	60.1%
Qinghai	5,923,957	2,930,423	49.5%	70.6%	74.7%	0.3%	54.2%
Gansu	25,019,831	2,656,393	10.6%	50.0%	63.2%	0.9%	65.0%
Ningxia	7,202,654	2,589,690	36.0%	75.7%	79.9%	0.4%	67.5%
China	1,409,778,724	125,332,335	8.9%				63.8%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Tab. 2-21, 3-1, 3-9, 6-18.

central, both of which fundamentally change the role of the periphery: the securing of energy supplies through overland routes (pipelines) to western China, and to raise the economic development of this region to a modern level through industrialization (Lai, 2021). Regardless of the economic prospects for success of this realignment, political control of the region is thus also becoming increasingly important.

The political role of the periphery

In addition to its strategic relevance as a border region of considerable size, China's periphery also has significance for the state's self-image. The expansion of the sphere of rule from central China to the western regions (especially Xinjiang and Tibet) as described above is increasingly understood by scholars as a colonial project, one that has not been fully completed to this day (Anand, 2019). This is consistent with the perception of the non-Han ethnic groups affected (Tobin, 2020: 15). From the perspective of the current party-state, these minority ethnic groups represent an integral part of the "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghuaminzu*中华民族). At the same time however, these ethnic groups are always understood as "less Chinese" than the Han, who constitute the core of the Chinese nation thus defined. Minority groups that are linguistically, culturally, and religiously most distant from the Han, such as Uyghurs or Tibetans living in Xinjiang, are at the same time constructed as an "exotic Other" and as a component of their own nation. This paradoxical combination of integration and exclusion leads to a mutually dependent insecurity and identity crisis on both sides (Tobin, 2020; Topgyal, 2016). This forms the backdrop for the inter-ethnic conflicts that have come to a head, especially since the 2000s. The central government is responding to this not only with the development programs described above to eliminate socioeconomic causes of discontent, but also with an assimilation policy that has been intensified especially under Xi Jinping's government. This is evident, for example, in the areas of education and religious policy. The ethnic groups in border regions, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, are seen as a danger to the nation-state, one that must be defused by weakening identification with one's own ethnic group and strengthening that with the "Chinese nation" (Bulag, 2021).

Tibet and Xinjiang

After the PLA invasion of Tibet, the PRC granted far-reaching special rights to the Tibetan government under the 14th Dalai Lama in its first decade. In doing so, it effectively recognized that Tibet had little in common with the rest of the country, and thus could only be integrated gradually. However, this privileged position applied only to central Tibet, not the regions of Kham and Amdo, which were subordinated to the surrounding provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.

An uprising originating in Kham against so-called "democratic reforms" intended to initiate a socialist transformation of society and the economy, spread in the late 1950s, finally leading to an uprising in Lhasa in March 1959. This was crushed by the PLA, and the Dalai Lama and his followers fled across the border to India, where a government-in-exile was established.[4] The "democratic reforms" were subsequently extended to central Tibet. The dominant position in the "old society" of the Buddhist monasteries and aristocracy, which had hitherto remained untouched, was abolished, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to directly take over administration of the region. Considerable destruction of traditional culture and forms of expression went hand in hand with this. Resistance, encouraged in part by the CIA, carried on underground until the end of the 1960s (Shakya, 2000). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the suppression of Tibetan culture and religion reached a peak, with excesses involving violence against cultural property by Red Guards and counterviolence, as in the Nyemo Uprising (Goldstein *et al.*, 2010).

In Xinjiang, the invasion of the PLA in 1949 put an end to aspirations for independence, and resistance was stifled as part of the "suppression of bandits". As in other minority regions, the tide turned from relative tolerance to intensified pressure to assimilate with the mass campaigns of the Mao era. Additional economic difficulties following the Great Leap Forward led to a mass exodus of nomadic Kazakh families to the neighboring Soviet Union in 1962. In the Sino-Soviet conflict, the Soviet Union used Uyghur and Kazakh forces living inside its own borders to exert political pressure on the border region. Border skirmishes also occurred during the Cultural Revolution, when religious practice was outlawed in Xinjiang as well (Clarke, 2011; Dillon, 2004). Like the US-backed guerrilla war in Tibet, this Cold War experience contributes to the PRC's strict rejection of any "interference in internal affairs" in the periphery to this day.

The Reform and Opening-up policy of the 1980s brought a significant easing of the domestic political situation, and a revival of the cultures and religions of non-Han ethnic groups. However, by the end of the decade, when it became clear that diplomatic contacts between representatives of the Dalai Lama and the PRC government would not bring about a rapprochement, protests again arose in Tibet (this time peacefully), which were put down heavy-handedly by the government. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this interplay between demonstrations, often led by Buddhist monks, and repression by the security forces continued.

In Xinjiang, discontent over Han Chinese immigration and the lack of cultural and religious self-determination was expressed early on in more violent ways, as in the "uprisings" of Baren in 1990 and Yining (Gulja) in 1997, as well as other incidents. The state has always blamed this on separatism and extremism, although the background is undoubtedly more complex (Alpermann, 2021). Security authorities tackled these riots

[4] This strained Sino-Indian relations, which escalated into the 1962 border war. The exact course of the border between India and the PR China is still disputed today. Since 2020, clashes have again intensified.

with campaigns that included many arrests and swift as well as severe sentences.

The "Great Western Development" campaign discussed above, beginning in 2000, increased the influx of Han Chinese migrants, in part by the connecting of Lhasa to the national rail network in 2006. This increased the sense of marginalization among the minority populations of Tibet and Xinjiang (Brox & Bellér-Hann, 2014; Fischer, 2014). These tensions erupted in street protests in Lhasa in March 2008, which turned violent and claimed 18 lives, according to official figures. Unlike before, these protests were not confined to Lhasa but spread to Tibetan-populated areas outside the TAR (Han & Paik, 2014). After their suppression, the following years were characterized by a wave of self-immolations, peaking in 2012 and 2013. A total of 136 Tibetans died in 157 such incidents, according to the Tibetan government-in-exile. The central government and local authorities responded with an unprecedented "securitization" of the region and even stricter control of religious activities and organizations (Powers, 2017).

In Xinjiang's capital Urumqi, there were also bloody inter-ethnic clashes in early July 2009 in which, according to the authorities, nearly 200 people, mainly Han, lost their lives. In the days that followed, Uyghurs experienced violent reprisals and a widespread wave of arrests. As in Tibet, the regional government responded with comprehensive security measures and the establishment of a large-scale surveillance system. Further violent clashes and terrorist attacks by Uyghurs led to a renewed intensification of the so-called "People's War on Terror" from 2014 onward (Hastings, 2019). In 2016, Tibet's previous party secretary, Chen Quanguo, moved to Xinjiang, bringing with him an already proven security strategy. Under his leadership, an extensive system of re-education camps was built in Xinjiang in the years that followed, where it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of the region's Uyghur and other Muslim minority peoples were to be "deradicalized" (Roberts, 2020).

This shocking treatment gave rise to a conflict that remains unresolved to this day between mainly Western critics, who insist on the observance of human rights, and the Chinese government. Accusations against the PRC include not only the re-education campaigns but also forced birth control, forced labor and other measures that can be summarized as "cultural genocide" (Alpermann, 2021).

At the same time however, the central government continues its involvement in the regional economy. This has so far tended to lead to a greater dependency of the local non-Han population on the state, thereby increasing their alienation. This includes programs to settle nomads and promote urbanization. A variety of studies have shown that while these approaches certainly have the potential to improve quality of life, they are also often accompanied by a loss of cultural autonomy and traditional ways of life, as well as greater state control (on Xinjiang, see Kobi, 2016; Shanatibieke, 2016; Steenberg & Rippa, 2019; on Tibet, see Roche *et al.*, 2020; Yeh, 2013; Yeh & Makley, 2019). In this respect, these programs should never be understood as purely regional economic developments, but also political programming aimed at homogenizing the "Chinese nation." It is important to note that administrative urbanization is automatically accompanied by the loss of autonomy status. Although there are "autonomous counties" and "autonomous administrative districts," there is no provision for "regional autonomy" for a city in the corresponding administrative ranking.

Conclusions

This overview shows that the PRC's political leadership is in the process of increasingly linking the periphery to the interior, replacing alternative ways of life such as nomadism and more traditional forms of agriculture with urbanization, industrialization, and a shift to tertiary industries. This process also includes assimilating ethnic groups that are considered potentially dangerous to the mainstream culture of the Han majority. In the process, it remains true that non-Han ethnic groups are seen as part of the "Chinese nation" but not as equal constituents thereof. At best, the more mundane identity characteristics of these ethnic groups (music, dance, costumes) are used for tourist marketing. In addition to cultural and political impositions, the periphery still plays an economically subordinate role as a supplier of resources. Even where, as in Xinjiang, targeted manufacturing industries are established through political measures, they are often either ecologically harmful, or labor-intensive industries that are already considered "backward" in eastern China. It is open as to what direction these conflicts between center and periphery will take in future.

Data availability

The data for this article consists of bibliographic references, which are included in the References section.

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Stefanie Kam
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

This is a useful historical and geographical summary of the peripheral regions of China, with a focus on Tibet and Xinjiang. While the discussion is structured, and there is a good use of established sources, the idea of the centre and periphery is simply not novel, and the central government has always wrestled with the problem of controlling the periphery. The heterogeneity of China is a well-established fact in the literature, and therefore it is unclear what the research puzzle is. The most significant problem with this article is that it is missing an original argument and does not take into account more recent developments in relation to China's policies towards the peripheries.

The subject of the Chinese government's management of its peripheries has been a popular topic in China studies. The work in this article is mostly supported by secondary literature on Xinjiang and Tibet, and the topic of the essay is discussed accurately. The author also cites key historical sources on Xinjiang by scholars like Millward and Perdue in Chinese politics. However, the manuscript lacks originality. The author should consider more recent works on China's peripheral policies, specifically the body of literature examining China's contemporary governing approach towards its ethnic minorities along the frontier. There have been numerous valuable works detailing the role of repression as a tool of governance in Xinjiang. See, for instance, Michael Clarke's edited volume on The Xinjiang Emergency: Exploring the Causes and Consequences of China's Mass Detention of Uyghurs[1], and Sean Roberts' book on The War on the Uyghurs: China's Campaign against Xinjiang's Muslims. Similarly, the author should also consider the most recent works on security and development in Tibet, particularly the work of Robert Barnett, Dibyesh Anand and Uradyn Bulag, including the latest ISDP Special Paper on Tibet published in May 2023. Finally, the author should also consider how an understanding of China's peripheries, particularly Tibet and Xinjiang, helps to advance the foundational arguments on China's contemporary management of its peripheries in China studies.

Moreover, there is a lack of primary data sources, and the article reads more of a summary or literature review of the various texts on Tibet and Xinjiang. I strongly recommend that the article

undergo a significant overhaul with a view to the originality of the arguments before being fit for indexing.

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Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Chinese domestic politics, Xinjiang, securitization of ethnic minorities.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 12 September 2023

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Johannes Küchler
Center for Cultural Studies on Science and Technology in China, TU Berlin University, Berlin, Berlin, Germany

The motive of this article is questionable. It is briefly elaborated in the abstract: "*reports about the more developed East coast often dominate the media, other parts of the country tend to be overlooked. This chapter therefore focuses on the more marginalized regions*". The author himself has documented in his earlier work the volume of Chinese and non-Chinese media coverage on the less developed Western regions as well academic research that has been accumulated over the

last century.

Also, the author remains rather undetermined in the use of key words like “peripheries”, “marginal”, “marginalization" or "marginalized regions". Throughout history, a contrast between core area and marginal areas with less favorable conditions for societies (yet supportive for the preservation of biodiversity) can be observed. Marginalization however describes a process of growing social, economic and environmental disparities between a center and its margin/periphery. At this point, when talking about the dynamics of marginalization, it becomes evident, that a more systematic presentation of center-periphery relations is in need. If one wishes to identify Chinese peripheries – as the title of the article suggests – one cannot overlook the results of Western research on multi-scalar center-periphery relations in political theory, historical research, economic geography, regional planning and the theories of development and underdevelopment. The diversity of these approaches aim at balancing a disequilibrium resulting from the dynamics of capitalist market economy. This is in contrast with the Chinese traditional and contemporary perception of a strictly hierarchic social order for which a center-periphery gradient is more or less constitutive. This gradient is verifiable and acknowledged in almost every province and even at the level of lower ranking administrative units. The article – by reducing “periphery” to minority occupied borderlands - overlooks these diverging traditions, just mentioning different “dimensions” of periphery in Chinese history:

- agricultural sedentary Han-Chinese versus nomadic pastoralist peoples
- “inner land” (neidi) versus “border regions“ (bianjiang)
- different types of territorial administration
- military actions to control the outer territories, partly as a reaction to the interference of imperialist powers

So far the article describes China’s outer territories as an object of the central state, exposed to occasional military intervention but without being integrated into a process of a growing disparity (exception Northeast). It is in the following chapter “*the economic importance of the periphery*” that Alpermann outlines a destructive process leading to social polarization and ecological degradation, combined with short term gains of the central state. It is only in the middle of this chapter that the author suddenly widens his understanding of “periphery” by including Han-Chinese settled remote areas as the “Western Regions” (xibu). Due to unfavorable terms of trade they had fallen behind the upsurge of the coastal zone. It is here, where Chinese economic policy to reduce social and regional imbalance could be interpreted and evaluated in the light of Western development theory, as it unfolded from the post-depression period up to the late 1970ies. The impact of the BRI (as mentioned by Alpermann) shows that at least for China’s Northwest growth poles and development axes changed the downward cycle of the periphery.

Alpermann then briefly touches “*the political role of the periphery*”, where he returns to his earlier equation “periphery = minority regions in borderlands”. The combined policy of “exclusion and integration” leads to a “*mutually dependent insecurity and identity crisis*” complicating the establishment of a Chinese nation-state.

The last chapter “Tibet and Xinjiang” brings an outline of the CPC’s changing policy versus the Tibetans and Moslem peoples in Xinjiang. Center-periphery relations are only touched in the sense, that these non-Han inhabited borderlands have a profound influence on China’s foreign policy. Recent infrastructure investments as well as the influx of Han migrants “*increased the sense of marginalization among the minority populations*”.

To summarize: The article aggregates a wealth of reference material on China's Western borderlands occupied by minority nationalities, but it is not a new contribution to the research on center-periphery relations. A guiding question should be clearly discernible. I therefore propose a revision of the text under one of the following headings:

- China's marginal lands as an object of securitization policy: the cases of Tibet and Xinjiang
- Exclusion versus integration in Tibet and Xinjiang: The dilemma of the CCP in managing the transformation of the pre-industrial Qing Empire into a modern multi-national state.
- China's changing peripheries: Marginalizing lands and peoples under the impact of externalized social and environmental costs. (To my knowledge -the multi-scalar nature of marginalization in China in time and space has not yet been systematically unfolded).
- Climate Change adaptation – new perspectives for China's western borderlands (or: peripheries).

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: History and Theory of Land Development

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 04 July 2023

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Germany
Melissa Shani Brown
East Asian Studies, Ruhr University Bochum, Bochum, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

This article provides a rich overview of the topic with insightful analysis. It is a valuable resource for anyone engaging with the topic. Overall the article is a strong contribution but would benefit from important revisions to the structure and clearer signposting.

The article would be improved by a clearer more focused introduction. This would also be in keeping with the guidelines to authors. The introduction could also make the central argument of the essay clearer, at times that central argument is lost and it needs to be stated more clearly from the outset. The central thesis of the piece is vague, or perhaps overly general.

It seems to imply near the beginning that there is not a lot of research on Tibet / Xinjiang in terms of either centre/periphery relationships or their political/economic 'dynamics' with Beijing. Specifically it states: "While reports about the more developed East coast often dominate the media, other parts of the country tend to be overlooked." It's not clear which 'media' are being referred to here, but it seems to be implying that there is limited research on these two regions, Tibet and Xinjiang, when there is quite a lot (as indeed is clear in the bibliography citing a lot of this research).

Our suggestion here is to make it clearer what the essay is aiming at ... it does seem to be a review / overview piece, but then that should be brought more to the surface by explaining at the outset what is revealed by looking at the centre/periphery dynamics in the cases of these regions.

The guidelines suggest up to 300 words for the abstract, providing both a succinct summary and indication of why the piece is interesting. As with adding an introduction, extending the Abstract somewhat would also help with clarifying the purpose of the piece from the outset.

The section 'The Political Role of the Periphery' is comparably very short in contrast to the other sections. It is a single paragraph. The next section 'Tibet and Xinjiang' seems to be somewhat of an extension of it, but then that seems to beg the question of why not integrate them into one section.

Given the detail gone into in the previous section on 'The Economic Importance of the Periphery', this section on the Political Role could be expanded - particularly because it is here that some of the points raised in the 'Conclusion' lie (e.g. regarding assimilation).

Some of the points raised in the Conclusion could be discussed in greater detail in the body of the essay, since they are forming key conclusions being put forwards. E.g. the preservation of ethnic cultures largely within tourism marketing is suddenly mentioned in the conclusion, but has not been discussed previously, A general suggestion here is to consider the structure of the piece, and possibly expanding some of the discussions further in order to lead more clearly towards the final conclusions.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Yes

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Ethnic identity in China; Uyghur and Han Identity; Theoretical Frameworks of Identity; Culture Studies and Critical Theory

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however we have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 04 Jul 2023

Björn Alpermann

Dear David, thanks a lot for your succinct and very helpful suggestions how to revise this piece! I agree with basically all your criticisms. Most stem from the fact that this was originally written as a chapter to a book addressing a more general audience (in German). Reading your comments, it is clear that I need to move away from that a good deal more to make this a viable stand-alone publication. So thanks again! Just one thing: The sction "Tibet and Xinjiang" is actually meant to be a subsection of "The political role of the periphery". Somehow this does not come out anymore in the typesetting used here for the headings. I will restructure this to make it clear.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.