



Question of ethnic group formulation in the Chinese census

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Received: 10 July 2019 / Accepted: 26 September 2019 / Published online: 14 October 2019
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Abstract

In conjunction with official government information and existing research literature, this article discusses ethnic group formulation in the censuses of China since 1953. Followed by an examination of concept of “ethnicity”, the research explores the purpose of the question included in the census, ways to answer the census question, and changes in number of official ethnic groups finalized until 1980s in China. To make a good study on ethnicity by census statistics, we have to understand the system of census taking on ethnicity in different countries. As a country with different minority groups, China is undergoing a social transformation and improving its census-taking. Ethnicity-related information collected in the census will play a more important role in the development of Chinese society.

Keywords Census · Ethnicity · China

1 Introduction

Today China is a country with 56 ethnic groups, including Han which are the majority of the Chinese and then there are Chinese from 55 ethnic minority groups. As the proportion of Han Chinese has declined over the years, the size of the minority Chinese is increasing (Table 1). In 2010, minority Chinese reached 113.79 million,¹ a size a little less than the national population of Mexico in 2012. With the ethno-cultural characteristics of the Chinese population, China collects ethnicity statistics in its census.

Census is a government work that collects demographic and social statistics on all individuals within a country at a specified time period. Surely, it is one important job of the Chinese government today. However, over the past 100 years, China experienced a fast and dramatic political and social change, from the Qing Dynasty

¹ <http://data.stats.gov.cn/search.htm?s=2010> 少数民族人口 (2019-5-25).

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Table 1 Change of Chinese population by ethnicity (%), 1953–2010

| | 1953 | 1964 | 1982 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 |
|------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Minorities | 6.06 | 5.78 | 6.7 | 8.01 | 8.41 | 8.49 |
| Han | 93.94 | 94.22 | 93.3 | 91.99 | 91.59 | 91.51 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

Sources: Figures are from the official report of censuses by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/> (2019-6-25)

(1636–1911) to the Republic of China (1912–1949) and to the People's Republic of China (1949+). Factors such as social instability (international and internal wars and revolution), weak ruling power of the government, high cost of census taking and the lack of professionals or experts in charge or implementing census prevented China from having a consistent census operating system and China did not have modern census until the 1950s. During the Republican era, the government had organized national and regional population surveys, but not a census during various years. For example, in 1912, the national government conducted a survey on the national population without a standard date or a specified area of coverage of the survey. The survey lasted over 5 years (Mo 2002). By the census definition of the United Nations, the first modern census in China was conducted in 1953, 4 years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Since then China has had a census taken regularly; the last one, the sixth census was carried out in 2010. Over the years, we find changes in the census, for example, items covered in the census, standard date of the census, cost of the census and number of census takers involved.

When we examined the questions asked in the Chinese census, we found one question of ethnicity was always included. In a census, the inclusion of specific questions (e.g. ethnicity), the way the question is worded, and the options of answers to the questions has been brought much attention to international organizations, national governments, scholars and individuals in different social research fields. Scholars have been interested in issues related to ethnicity questions in surveys and censuses including measuring a dynamic and multi-dimensional concept of ethnicity by a single categorical question, different expectations about the concept or question, as well as the effectiveness of such a measure (Burton et al. 2010: 1333–1334). While there are many discussions and studies on ethnicity and census in the international academic field, very few or even no discussion specifically about ethnicity question in Chinese census or survey appears in Chinese academic literature. This paper does not explore reason(s) of the lack of the study. Instead, it will examine the ethnicity or ethnic group question in the Chinese census. More specifically, it will discuss the definition of ethnicity for the census as well as for general purpose, reasons to include the ethnicity question in the Chinese census, as well as a short history of changes of ethnic groups in China related to census. The study will increase our knowledge of ethnicity in the census by a Chinese example, remind us the complicated issue of ethnicity information collected in a census, warn us to use the census statistics cautiously (e.g. for international comparison), and make us think about the best way to collect ethnic statistics in different countries.

In this paper, we use word “ethnicity” but not other words for our discussion on the issue. We find in places where collected statistics of ethnic group, “race” or/and “ethnicity” are the most common words used to describe the different characteristics of the population by ethnicity. Countries with populations of different races may use both words today while trying to minimize the negative connotation associating with word of “race” (e.g. US) or not mention race in their census (e.g. UK). Chinese census does not use a word equivalent of “race” (种族), but a word of *Minzu* (民族)² similar to “ethnicity”. The word of ethnicity matches the meaning of the Chinese word *Minzu* or *Zuqun* (族群), a word that describes a socially defined category of an ethnic group. Therefore, to avoid confusion, we use word “ethnicity” or “ethnic group” to describe related questions and answers in the Chinese census.

2 Definition of ethnicity in the Chinese census

In the Chinese census, “ethnicity” status or identity has been asked in one question since the first census in 1953. There was no definition of ethnicity for the census, and the definition seems redundant since its meaning should be as natural as categories of name, age or place of residence in a census. Or, without a definition of ethnicity for census, there should be no dispute or confusion to the individuals answering the question and to the individuals reading the statistics from the census. This situation, without an overt definition, means that Chinese are accepting a classification of ethnicity at social as well as at individual level. It leads to a question of what is the definition of ethnicity in Chinese society.

The word ethnicity or *Minzu* was not a Chinese native word. It is not clear when and who used the word of “*Minzu*” (ethnicity) in China first, but most people agreed that the word has been used in China since around 1900 probably first by philologist, philosopher and revolutionary Zhang Tai-yan or reformist and philosopher Liang Qi-chao (e.g., Jin and Wang 1981; Huang 2002), or even imported from Japan in the latter part of 1900 since the two countries share some Chinese characters in their languages (e.g., Ma 2010: 32).

By having the word appeared and used in China, meaning of the word or definition of ethnicity became an issue. Liang Qi-chao considered ethnicity as a product of evolution of folk customs with eight characteristics: same residence, descent, physical features, language, written words, religion, custom, and livelihood (cite from Lin 1990: 102). Or people belonging to one ethnicity should share the eight characteristics. The most popular and authoritative definition of ethnicity in China, especially after 1949, was that of Stalin. According to Stalin, ethnicity is “a historically constituted community of people having a common language, a common geographical

² Rong Ma, a leading sociologist, proposed to use “*Zuqun* 族群” instead of “*Minzu*” to describe or refer an ethnic group since *Minzu*, translated as “nation” related to political movements while *Zuqun* “refers to groups of people within multiethnic countries who have different histories of social development, different cultural traditions (including language and religion), who possess strong internal identities, and who may, to a certain extent, be classified as subcultural groups” (2010: 32).

residence, a common economic life and a common psychological make-up which expresses itself in a common culture” (1979: 64).

With changes in understanding and discussion of ethnicity in China over the years, we find an official definition of ethnicity today by The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which is very similar to that of Stalin. Ethnicity represents “a group of people who share a common language, geographical location, economic life as well as same psychological quality based on same culture” (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Linguistics, ed. 2002: 884). This definition adds more requirements to be an ethnic group than the United Nations definition, or adds required elements of culture, economics and language. According to the United Nations, ethnicity can be broadly defined as an entity whose members have “a shared understanding of history and territorial origins (regional and national) of an ethnic group or community, as well as on particular cultural characteristics such as language and/or religion” (United Nations 2008: 139). And in 2005, the State Council of Chinese government explained ethnicity in an official document as a stable community of people with common characteristics in history, production mode, language, culture, customs and psychological identity; for some groups, religion has played an important role in the formation of the group.³ This latest official explanation of ethnicity omitted geographical or territorial requirement but emphasized the role of religion for certain ethnic groups. With these last two definitions of ethnicity in mind (by the Chinese Academy of Social Science and the State Council), we discuss the ethnicity question in the Chinese census.

3 Question on ethnicity in the 2010 census, purpose and answers of the question

There is only one question for ethnicity in both the short and long census form⁴ of the 2010 Chinese census. The question is very simple, represented as “R5 Ethnicity” (Fig. 1).

3.1 Purpose

Over the years, Chinese government never clearly stated their reason(s) about collecting ethnic statistics in the census, or made a statement about it directly. However, indirectly, the information seems important in serving the general purpose of the Chinese census: politically, the census will provide information for voting registration for representatives at various levels of the People’s Congress; economically, the census provides accurate population information for national economic planning

³ “About further strengthening the ethnic work, accelerating economic and social development in ethnic regions” http://www.lawyee.net/Act/Act_Display.asp?RID=836601 (2019-5-25).

⁴ “How many types of census forms for the 6th Chinese census” http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/zdtjgz/zgrkpc/dlcrkpc/zs/201004/t20100419_69988.htm (2019-5-25).

第六次全国人口普查短表

表号: R 6 0 1 表
制定机关: 国家 普查 局
批准文号: 国发〔2009〕23号
生效日期: 2 0 1 0 年 1 2 月

本户地址: _____ 户别: _____ 多、住: _____ 普查区: _____ 普查小区: _____ 建筑物: _____
房屋地址: _____

H1. 户编号: _____ H2. 户别: _____ H3. 本户常住人口数: _____ H4. 2009.11.1 - 2010.10.31 常住人口: _____ H5. 本户住房建筑面积: _____ H6. 本户住房间数: _____

R1. 姓名: _____ R2. 性别: _____ R3. 出生年月: _____ R4. 民族: _____ R5. 民族: _____ R6. 普查时点居住地: _____ R7. 户口登记地: _____ R8. 最新户口登记地: _____ R9. 最新户口登记地: _____ R10. 户口: _____ R11. 最高学历: _____ R12. 受教育程度: _____

(超过5人户, 以第2张普查表, 户表或问卷“H1. 户编号”)

Fig. 1 2010 Census short form of China

(Wang 1986: 97). To achieve these goals, ethnicity of the population should be a category in the census.

Political and economic considerations are behind the purposes of census taking; however, the general goal of censuses has been changed from one to another. For example, the fourth census in 1990 wanted⁵ to examine changes in population size, structure, geographic distribution and characteristics since the third census in 1982. Demographic changes over the years were considered important. The fourth census also wanted to get reliable information for the national economic and social development strategy and plan, co-ordinate many aspects of life of Chinese, as well as examine how well the implementation of Chinese population policy was progressing. During the 1980s and 1990s, population policy was a significant as well as a controversial national policy and the Chinese government used the census to check or track progress or the effect of their policies. Since the Chinese population policy is an ethnic sensitive policy (minority Chinese are under a more relaxed population regulation in terms of the number of children a couple may have compared to Han or the majority of Chinese), the ethnic group and population data from the census helped the government monitor the effect of its population policy. Again in 2010, the Chinese government stated the purpose of census taking as “taking the census regularly will identify changes of population in size, structure, distribution and living environment... will provide scientific and accurate statistics for making policies

⁵ “On Fourth National Population Census” (by The State Council, 1989.10.25) <http://www.people.com.cn/item/ffgk/gwyfj/1989/112103198904.html> (2019-6-25).

of population, labor and employment, education, social welfare and ethnicity”⁶. It seems that the 2010 census was the first time that the Chinese government clearly mentioned the purpose of census taking related to ethnicity: data collected in the census will be used for the development of ethnic group’s regions in China.

3.2 Answers

As of choices of answers to the question of ethnicity in census, there is no list of ethnic groups for individuals to choose one as an answer. However, today China acknowledges 56 ethnic groups, including “Han” (91.51% of total population in 2010) and other 55 ethnic minority groups (8.49% of the total population).⁷ Every census respondent needs to write down the name of the ethnic group he or she belongs to within the blank space provided on the census form (Fig. 1). Since ethnicity status cannot be changed in one’s life in China and children from parents with different ethnicities choose only one ethnic group as his or her lifelong ethnic group, Chinese will not get confused with the ethnicity question in the census and will give a definite answer to the question. This way the census answer is similar to the type of “open-text” answer or “write-in” answer of the census, but differs from the choice of answer in that one needs to choose one category from a pre-defined list or pre-designated categories.

As to the number of ethnic groups one may answer in the census, Chinese can only write down one but no more than one ethnic group on the census form, according to the rules of answering the census.⁸ It consists with ethnicity status in Chinese society that one only belongs to one and there is only one ethnic group in one’s life. However, we still may get wrong answers for the question.

People may make mistakes intentionally or unintentionally when answering the ethnicity question in Chinese census (Shi 1995). First, some people confuse their ethnic group name with others. An ethnic group may have several names to call themselves in daily life. However, only one of the self-called names is listed officially as one of the 56 ethnic groups. The other self-claimed names are still used locally and may sound similar to a name of other ethnic group. This leads to answering the census question mistakenly with a name from the name of the official 56 ethnic groups, or the name belongs to another ethnic group(s) but only sounds similar

⁶ “Why we need to take census” http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/zdtjgz/zgrkpc/dlcrkpc/dlcrkpczs/201004/t20100419_69994.htm (2019-6-25). In June 2010, China has implemented “The Regulation on National Population Census”. In the regulation, the purpose of taking census in China is defined in the article 2 as “to have comprehensive knowledge of national population, to provide information for study and make population policies as well as economic and social development plans, and to provide demographic information to the general public”. http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/tjfg/xzfg/201005/t20100528_36036.html (2019-6-25).

⁷ “Major figures of the 2010 national population census” http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/zdtjgz/zgrkpc/dlcrkpc/dlcrkpcyw/201104/t20110428_69407.htm (2019-5-25).

⁸ One may answer ethnic category in the census differently from one’s officially recognized ethnicity identity; however, the answer will not change or replace one’s ethnicity in real life (Population and Social Science/Technology Statistics Division of National Bureau of Statistics, 2000: 11).

Table 2 Types of misreporting of ethnic groups in China

| Type of mistakes | Officially listed name | Self-called name(s) or name(s) called by others | Mistakenly listed as another ethnic group in the census |
|--|------------------------|--|---|
| Confusing one's name with name of other ethnic groups | <i>Buyizu</i> (布依族) | Self-called names: <i>Buyi</i> (布依) <i>Tiantouchongjia</i> (田头仲家) <i>Yijia</i> (夷家) <i>Shuijia</i> (水家) | — — <i>Yizu</i> (彝族) <i>Shuizu</i> (水族) |
| Using a name called by others which happen to be an official name for the ethnic group | <i>Miaozu</i> (苗族) | Names called by others: <i>Gaoshanzu</i> (高山族) <i>Gaoshanmiao</i> (高山苗) <i>Duanqunmiao</i> (短裙苗) <i>Heimiao</i> (黑苗) | <i>Gaoshanzu</i> (高山族) |
| Without a name yet but tried to be included | — | <i>Nanjingren</i> (南京人) 贵州 | <i>Jingzu</i> (京族) |

Source: Rearranged according to the explanation by Shi (1995)

Table 3 Unidentified ethnic group populations from six censuses in China

| Year | Total population | Unidentified ethnic group populations | Naturalization | Unidentified/total population (%) |
|------|------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1953 | 577,856,141 | 1,017,299 | 1004 | 0.18 |
| 1964 | 691,220,104 | 32,411 | 7416 | 0.00 |
| 1982 | 1,003,913,927 | 799,705 | 4937 | 0.08 |
| 1990 | 1,130,510,638 | 752,347 | 3498 | 0.07 |
| 2000 | 1,242,612,226 | 734,438 | 941 | 0.06 |
| 2010 | 1,332,810,869 | 640,101 | 1448 | 0.05 |

Source: Population Census Office under the State Council and Department of Population, Social Science and Technology Statistics of National Bureau of Statistics of China (2012) (for 2010 data, p. 54), (2002) (for 2000 data, p. 46), (1993) (for 1990 data, p. 319), (1985) (for 1982 data, p. 20); Department of Population Statistics of State Statistical Bureau and Economic Department of State Nationalities Affairs Commission (1994) (for data of 1953 and 1964, p. 2)

to their group in spoken language. An example could be *Buyizu* (布依族) (Table 2). There are several local names for this ethnic group. A few of them, e.g. *Yijia* and *Shuijia* sound similar to other ethnic groups, namely *Yizu* and *Shuizu* respectively. Thus in the census we find people did not answer the question according to their ethnic identity but followed the name that was similar to their locally used name or the ethnic group which they do not belong to.

Second, people adopt an ethnic group name called by others which happens to be on the list of 56 ethnic groups. In Guizhou province of China, we find people answering ethnicity question as *Gaoshanzu* (高山族) instead of *Miaozu* (苗族) the ethnic group they actually belong to. An important reason for this is that the *Miao* group in this area is called by others as “*Gaoshanmiao*, *Duanqunmiao*, *Heimiao* (高山苗, 短裙苗, 黑苗)”. One of the names, “*Gaoshanmiao*” is very similar to the official name of *Gaoshanzu*, an ethnic group very different from *Gaoshanmiao*. However, some local *Miao* people in Guizhou province claimed themselves as *Gaoshanzu* instead of *Miao* in the census.

And third, people without a clear ethnic identity may try to claim themselves to be in a wrong ethnic group. For different reasons, especially practical reasons, some of them answer ethnicity question as one ethnic group on the list of 56 ethnic groups in China. For example, we find a few people of *Jingzu* (京族) in Guizhou province are not *Jingzu*, but belongs to an unidentified ethnic group of “*Nanjingren* (南京人)” who adopted the middle name of *Jing* as the name of their ethnic group following the name of *Jingzu* (京族) in the ethnic group list (Table 2). In the population of *Dulongzu* (独龙族) in Guizhou province, we also find some of them are in the unidentified group of *Longjia* (龙家), who tried to fit into the list of ethnic groups by deleting the latter word of their group name and add “*Du*” in front, thus a name equal to the name of *Dulongzu* (独龙族) in the official ethnic group list. These confusions are especially observed in areas with mixed ethnic groups. Due to different reasons, there are still some unidentified ethnic groups in China today (Table 3). The number is small compared to the total population in China and the number is getting smaller in each succeeding census.

Although these are some of the possibilities of mistakes in census answers by individual respondents, if we do not consider mistakes of the answers or misclassification of one's ethnicity in the census, we can group the answers of census question R5 in 2010 into three groups: (1) one define ethnic group of the 56 ethnic groups, coded from 01–56; (2) “others”, coded as 97; and (3) “naturalization”, coded as 98 (The State Council National Office of Sixth Census ed. 2010: 137). Answers of “others” means that the individual's ethnic identity is not finalized yet as a result of the ethnic classification project started in 1950s; if one answered as “others”, the census does not require one to write down reason for the answer. The category of “naturalization ‘入籍’” means that the individual was a foreigner, became a Chinese citizen now but does not belong to any one ethnic group officially recognized in China. For some individuals naturalized in China, especially those who moved in near the borders of China, they may determine their ethnic identity since the country they came from has similar or identical ethnic groups as those in China. According to figures in Table 3, the size of individuals in categories of “others” or “naturalization” was small. It was a little over 640 thousands and only 0.05% of the total population in 2010.

4 Changes in and finalization of number of ethnic groups in the Chinese censuses

Since the first census in China (1953), “ethnicity” has been a question on the census form. Although China has asked ethnicity question in all its censuses without changes in format of the question, type or category of ethnic groups in the censuses are different from 1953 to those of 2010. Early censuses covered more ethnic groups and later censuses accepted only 56 ethnic groups as choice of answer to the ethnicity question. The finalization of 56 ethnic groups was a result of an ethnic classification project from the 1950s and ended in 1979. To understand the current framework of ethnic groups in China as well as in the census, an examination of changes in categories of ethnic groups in China, categories used in previous censuses and principles of inclusion of individual ethnic groups into the census will serve the purpose.

Categories or numbers of ethnic groups in the census are a reflection of the acceptance of the categories in a society. What are the accepted ethnic groups in Chinese society so far? As mentioned earlier, China started to use word of *Minzu* or ethnicity to refer to people with different ethnic characteristics a little over 100 years ago compared with its long history over 5000 years. In the hundred years, we find the categories of ethnicity changed from an umbrella term to specific groups and from more groups to a well-defined number of groups. Here we do not attempt to explore history of the use of the concept of ethnicity in China, but do attempt to find the categories/numbers of ethnicity used in recent Chinese history, especially by authoritative figures as well as ethnic policies that may influence the general classification of ethnic groups.

4.1 Ethnic groups identified by Chinese authoritative figures

Before the Republic of China, Liang Qi-chao in his general theory of ethnicity (“大民族主义”) proposed that China to the world is a nation with six ethnic groups: Han, Manchus, Mongolian, Hui, Miao and Tibetan (Liang 1989: 75–76). Six ethnic groups, the most populous groups then, were used to represent his vision of ethnic groups in China as well as a nation with different ethnic groups in the world. The exclusion of many other smaller ethnic groups in Liang’s general theory of ethnicity reflected the lack of a concept of ethnicity, fuzzy classification of ethnic groups, or even lack of interests in issue of ethnicity in Chinese society then.

During the period of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen, who fought the Qing Dynasty as well as foreign invasion and was the founder of the Republic of China, declared in the Declaration by the Provisional President of the Republic of China in 1912 that “foundation of a nation is people... To combine ethnic groups like Han, Manchus, Mongolian, Hui and Tibetan into one unit is the unification of ethnicity” (1982: 2). Ethnic groups in Sun’s declaration reduced the number to five. Unlike Liang’s definite number of ethnic groups used in his writing, Sun used a word “etc.” to give room to include or recognize more ethnic groups into Chinese ethnicity. However, due to too many works to be dealt with for a new government in 1910s, Sun did not pay enough attention to the ethnicity issue, especially the number or groups of ethnic groups to be recognized in Chinese society.

Mao Zedong, as a successor of Chiang Kai-shek and founder of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, since 1949), realized the issue of ethnicity in China even before the establishment of PRC. He mentioned in 1939 that “China has a 450 million population, about one-fourth of the world population. In this population, over 90% are Han Chinese. Other than Han, there are dozens of ethnic groups including Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, Uyghur, Miao, Yi, Zhuang, Zhongjiaren [Buyi], Chaoxian etc. Even at a different stage of cultural development, they all have a long history. China is a nation with various ethnic groups and a vast population” (1991: 622). Compared with number of ethnic groups in China expressed by different authoritative figures, Mao counted more ethnic groups while at the same time he put forth a limited number of ethnic groups in China. It is not hundreds but only dozens. Since the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, the government followed its earlier policy on ethnicity and emphasized the equal opportunity for development of different ethnic groups.

Within about 100 years, Chinese society accepted a rather new concept of ethnicity, interpreted meaning(s) of ethnicity by different scholars and authorities, and promoted a clear definition of ethnicity by stating qualifications to be an ethnic group. Also, over the years, Chinese started to specify the numbers of ethnic groups from fewer but larger size to more but smaller size of ethnic groups (Table 4). Until the 1950s, other than the major ethnic groups mentioned publicly by the politicians, Chinese government was aware of the existence of different ethnic groups within China. Census taking is one way to reveal the complex structure of ethnicity and is a way to push the government into gradually making the number of ethnic groups fixed and stabilized. This process of finalization of number of ethnic groups accepted is closely related to or influenced by ethnic policies in China.

Table 4 Changes in number of ethnic groups accepted in China

| Proposed by | # Proposed |
|---|--|
| Liang Qi-chao (1904) | 6 |
| Sun Yat-sen (1912) | 5 + etc. |
| Mao Zedong (1939) | dozens |
| Ethnic Classification Project (1950s +) | 38 (1954) 38 + 15 (1964) 38 + 15 + 2 (1965,1979) |

Number in the parentheses is years

4.2 Ethnic policies in China

China has ethnic policies under different governments. The policies have affected the acknowledgement and treatment of ethnic groups and which ethnic groups are included in a census. During the national government period (1912–1949), the government encouraged people from different ethnic groups to build China together and to form a united and free China. The constitution of the Republic of China stated clearly equality among people of various ethnic groups. Assimilation and autonomous of the ethnic groups (especially in the frontier area) were also part of the ethnic policy. Regarding the frontier area, the national government emphasized the development in economy and education. Respecting religion and customs of ethnic groups were also key elements of the national ethnic policy (Xu et al. 2011: 398–404).

Since the Chinese Communist Party took over power in 1949, the central government of the PRC has been emphasizing equality, unity and regional autonomy of the ethnic groups, the three main principles of the ethnic policy in China. Basic elements of the Chinese ethnic policy were stated by the Chinese government as, (1) upholding equality and unification among ethnic groups, (2) practicing regional autonomy for ethnic minority Chinese, (3) developing economy and culture in the ethnic minority areas, (4) training ethnic minority cadres, (5) using and developing the spoken and written languages of the ethnic groups, (6) developing educational, scientific, technological and cultural undertakings, (7) respecting and guaranteeing the freedom of religious belief, and (8) valuing and protecting the customs of the ethnic minorities.⁹ However, there were different focuses in different time periods. For example, in 1949–1957, ethnic identification and classification (the one closely related to our topic in this article) as well as winning and uniting influential religious leaders or figures of ethnic groups were some of the policies focused on; in 1976–1999, rebuilding the ethnic minority autonomous system, against separationism, and a new policy for ethnic education were part of the policy (Jin 2009: 5, 22). All the policies have aimed at a harmonious relationship among ethnic groups in China (Ma 2012; Wang 2012).

⁹ “Chinese Ethnic Policy”, http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-07/14/content_335746.htm (2019-6-25).

A few important laws and regulations are behind and support the ethnic policy in China. These include the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (1949), a foundation for new China's ethnic policies; the Program for the Implementation of Regional Ethnic Autonomy of the People's Republic of China (1952), the first legal regulation on regional autonomy of ethnic groups and its major contents on ethnic minority were written in the first constitution of China in 1954; the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy (1984 and the 2001 amendment), a basic law for implementing the system of regional ethnic autonomy stated in the Constitution. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1954 and all the subsequent 7 amendments) all affirmed and reaffirmed the equality among all ethnic groups and regional autonomy for ethnic minorities in the ethnic minority concentrated areas.

The State Ethnic Affairs Commission of PRC (SEAC) is the highest governmental organization in charge of ethnic issues in China. The organization is a ministry level organization of the State Council of PRC, which was established in 1949, abolished in 1970 and reestablished in 1978 according to the explanation of SEAC.¹⁰ The commission has been involved in several activities directly or indirectly related to ethnicity issues on census: the ethnic classification project in 1950s as well as regulations of "Principle on Restoration and Correction of Ethnic Status" (1981), "Supplement on Issue of Restoration and Correction of Ethnic Status" (1982), "Regulation on Identification of Ethnic Status among Chinese Citizen" (1990) and "Administrative Measure on Registration of Ethnic Status among Chinese Citizen" (2015, worked with the Ministry of Public Security). Article 5 of the measure states that the ethnic status of an individual depends on his or her mother or father and Article 7 indicates that once the status is registered, it will not be changed in general.¹¹ This measure in 2015 represents the latest move of the regulation of ethnic status. The ethnic policy of the People's Republic of China and works of SEAC guided and helped the finalization of ethnic groups recognized in China and the result involved changes and finalization in the number of ethnic groups accepted in Chinese society as well as groups included in a census. Although we do not know exact reasons for individuals' selection on ethnic group for those whose parents are from different ethnic groups, as mentioned in Sect. 3.2, but minority favorable policies on education, work and promotion at work are most practical reasons given for the individual's decision.

4.3 Finalization of ethnic groups in China as well as for the census

Regarding census taking and ethnicity questions between 1910 and 1950, first, there were only attempts of census taking. For example, Mr. He (何) considered the 1911 population survey as the first population census in modern Chinese history (2000, 86–87). However, according to the definition of census by the United Nations, they

¹⁰ "History of SEAC", <http://www.seac.gov.cn/seac/mwjs/201012/1009123.shtml> (2019-5-25).

¹¹ "Administrative Measure on Registration of Ethnic Status among Chinese Citizen" <http://www.seac.gov.cn/seac/xwzx/201506/1002606.shtml> (2019-6-25).

were only efforts to collect regional population information (e.g. in Yunnan Province in 1939 and 1942; Chen 1981: 22) and national demographic information (e.g. in 1912 and 1928 by the National Government; Li and Mo 1993: 242); they were not a national population census. Second, even with the efforts of census taking, the national government did not collect any ethnicity information prior 1949. Therefore, generally speaking, the first modern Chinese census took place in 1953 since the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Questions in the first census of China in 1953 only had six items: name, gender, age, ethnicity, relationship to household head and household address. Ethnicity clearly was an important question. According to self-reported answers of the ethnicity question, the government received more than 400 ethnic groups that year.¹² It is hard to differentiate if all the reported ethnic groups were individual ethnic groups, names of the place that the group lived, names for different groups within one ethnic group, names called by the group or other groups, or names translated from local dialect to Han Chinese (Fei 1980: 147). This large number of ethnic groups indicated the self-recognized ethnic identity; however, the size was not practical to promote equality among ethnic groups in economic and social development, which was a goal of the Chinese government. Therefore, since 1950s, initiated by the government, experts in ethnology, language and history as well as local influential people have been working together on an ethnic classification project. The goal of this project was to implement policies of the Chinese Communist Party for ethnic groups when the government wanted to balance personnel in government offices by ethnicity or to have clear understanding about characteristics of the ethnic groups in the ethnic autonomous regions.

Principles of the ethnic classification were two, characteristics of ethnic groups and willingness of the group to be classified (e.g., Shi 2005; Lin 2005). Characteristics of the ethnic groups were an objective rule, which was basically evaluated by the criteria of common geographical location, language, economic life and psychological make-up. These evaluation criteria were heavily influenced by the definition and explanation of ethnicity used by Stalin. However, during the classification process, Chinese also made detailed studies on name(s) and historical origin of the ethnic groups to be identified. Names of the ethnic group may come from self-called name, names called by others, or names called by each other. Thus the name provided some hint of the characteristics and relationship of each ethnic group as well as among the groups. On top of this, studies of historical origin also provided strong or weak evidence to prove or disprove the recognition of the group as an official ethnic group.

Willingness of the ethnic groups means the intension of the individual ethnic group to be listed as an independent ethnic group officially. One group may be qualified as an ethnic group in China according to the objective evaluation. However, people of the group may not want to be listed independently, or listed as this but not that ethnic group. Therefore, during the identification process, ethnicity intension of

¹² "Ethnic group identification and development of 56 ethnic groups" <http://www.seac.gov.cn/seac/zcfg/200703/1071795.shtml> (2019-5-25).

an individual group was very important. The willingness of the group was considered and respected. The name of an ethnic group was determined by the local group (“名从主人”) and the name of the group was acceptable to those being described.

Current categories and numbers of ethnic groups in the census were a product of the ethnic classification project. From the easiest to the hardest, in 1949–1954, China identified 38 ethnic minority groups or the most accepted ethnic groups in the past. In 1954–1964, between the first 2 censuses, China added 15 more minority groups, plus another 2 groups in 1965–1982 (also see Table 4).¹³ Since the 1982 census, China accepted 56 ethnic groups, including 55 ethnic minority groups. Therefore, 56 ethnic groups have become a framework for the ethnicity question in the Chinese census. We may conclude that numbers of ethnic groups in Chinese census have changed from unlimited to limited and from more to fewer categories. This change is for the better development of all Chinese without any difference in ethnicity, favoring the development of ethnic minority Chinese.

5 Conclusion

Ethnicity has been a question in Chinese census since 1950s when China started to take the census. Many other countries have longer history of census taking and have similar practice of asking ethnicity related questions in their census. According to Simon’s detailed study (2012), about half of European countries collect ethnicity information in the census. These countries adopt their own strategies to collect the information, for example using country of birth, citizenship, mother tongue, religion or directly asking about “ethnic group” (e.g. the United Kingdom). The way some questions are asked may not seem related to ethnicity, however, we are able to translate or convert the questions into the information of ethnicity. Or, we may collect ethnicity statistics by a direct or indirect question. China is asking the question directly and by one question in its census. Wording of the question is straightforward and without any change over the years; however, answers to the question have been changed. In 1950s, people answered the census ethnicity question by their own classification of their ethnic group; since 1980s, individuals answered the question within a framework of 56 ethnic groups. One belongs to only one of the 56 ethnic groups. The framework was developed by experts, officials, local influential people and local residents. It was finalized in 1980s and has been stable since then.

Due to changes in the number of ethnic groups accepted by the Chinese census, ethnicity statistics in 1950s and today are a little different. Statistics in 1950s showed a confusion and loose definition or concept of ethnicity by ordinary Chinese, a different understanding of ethnicity among Chinese from that of the government or elites, and a need to deal with the ethnicity issue in a more organized or widely accepted way. However, we believe that the confusion of ethnicity in the first census of 1953 was a treasure for the development of a framework of ethnic groups

¹³ “Ethnic group identification and development of 56 ethnic groups” <http://www.seac.gov.cn/seac/zcfg/200703/1071795.shtml> (2019-5-25).

later in China. It provided vast information on ethnicity, especially names and numbers of different ethnic groups used and accepted by ordinary people. It collected the information within a very short time period (census time), thus the first census also served as a survey of names of ethnic groups in China. Also it enhanced consciousness or identity of ethnicity among Chinese. Statistics of ethnicity today are limited to 56 ethnic groups, different from that of 1953. Thus, a comparison of population by ethnicity at different time points may pose a problem. We may not be able to study a specific ethnic group in China by census statistics over the years since the definition of ethnic groups changed until 1980s. This reminds us to use the ethnicity statistics cautiously even within a nation, or we need to know the history of census taking of a country in order to interpret the data accurately. This also applies to studies by ethnicity statistics from different countries (Simon 2012: 1368). To make a good study on ethnicity by census statistics, we have to understand the system of census taking on ethnicity in different countries. This study makes one effort to that goal by exploring the definition of ethnicity in the Chinese census, by examining goals of collecting ethnicity statistics in China, and by analyzing the short history towards the finalization of 56 ethnic groups, including a brief introduction of the ethnic policy in China.

Different factors may lead to a change of ethnic boundaries including or excluding an ethnic group in a country, using Wimmer's words and by his explanation (2008), "exogenous shift" (such as changes of institutional frameworks, power distributions, or political alliances), "endogenous shift" (changes endogenously by various factors), or "exogenous drift" (new strategies diffused into a social field that are adopted by certain actors). Ethnic conflicts may also affect the recognition or identity of an ethnic group in a country. In China, factors such as imbalanced regional economic development, internal migration from the eastern part of China to the west, especially in the traditional ethnic minority regions, as well as positive or negative international influences may all pose some challenges to the ethnic relationship among different ethnic groups and even within an ethnic group. As part of social change, changes of population size by ethnicity (some may become a larger ethnic group while others may disappear), and increasing volume of international migration will introduce a gradual but slow change, even a challenge in the current framework of ethnic groups. Thus, experiences, including the lessons, of countries with various native ethnic groups or as a host country of international migrants in inclusion or exclusion of an ethnic group in census (such as issues discussed by Aspinall 2002) will be worth further study to better construct the census as well as the use of census statistics for social development.

Acknowledgements This research was supported by a grant from the National Social Science Foundation of China (Grant number 17BRK022). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. The efforts of Ms. Jenna Cook in editing are also very much appreciated.

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