

# ON THE BRINK OF REVOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S INCOMPLETE REVOLUTION AND ITS IMPENDING COMPLETION BY MINORITY GROUPS

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"The revolution is not yet completed. All my comrades must struggle on."

-Sun Yat-sen

## INTRODUCTION

Although China's 1949 Revolution could be considered a completion of its 1911 Revolution, the Chinese Revolution actually remains incomplete. While these two events altered the political and economic structures of the country, the societal structure was fundamentally unchanged. Chinese society has indicated a need for change and certain factors point towards an impending movement to bring about these necessary changes. Naturally, it could be anticipated that those who require social changes more so than any other change will be the ones spearheading a movement for change, especially if this is an educated group of people. It is, therefore, evident that the recent and significant improvements in the education of minority groups in China will be the driving factor in carrying out the remaining steps of the Chinese Revolution.

## REVOLUTION

When one considers a revolution certain components, such as change, are obvious, but revolutions also entail other less blatant attributes. The word "revolution" originates from the Latin word *revolutio*, which translates to: "revolving" or "turning around." The first of these definitions supports the Marxist idea that revolutions are ongoing processes that do not simply take place within one event. The second of these translations implies an entire *volte-face*. A revolution is a combination of these two translations: an ongoing process of complete change.



In order to obtain a complete understanding of revolution, it is necessary to look as far back as Plato and Aristotle to observe the origins of defining and explaining revolutions. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that revolution is motivated by groups who are at a disadvantage in their society. He describes these disadvantaged peoples as being, “ready to sting and fully armed, and some of them owe money, some have forfeited their citizenship; a third class in both predicaments; and they hate and conspire against those who have got their property, and against everybody else, are eager for revolution.”<sup>1</sup> He believed that revolutions were economically motivated by oppressed groups of people seeking a drastic change. Similarly, in *Politics*, Aristotle makes the claim that “poverty is the parent of revolution.”<sup>2</sup> According to Aristotle, it is “men of ruined fortunes sure to stir up revolutions.”<sup>3</sup> It is evident that even as long ago as the 400s BCE, oppression, especially economically, has been a predominant factor in causing revolutions.

For thousands of years, scholars have continued to expound these theories of revolution. Theories have evolved based on necessity in society. Hanna Arendt, for example stated, “The social question began to play a revolutionary role only when, in the modern age and not before, men began to doubt that poverty is inherent in the human condition.”<sup>4</sup> Plato and Aristotle focused mainly on the causes of revolutions, while subsequent ideologists also considered their effects. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that “the effect of all revolution is, more or less, to surrender men to their own guidance, and to open to the mind of every man a void and almost unlimited range of speculation.”<sup>5</sup> This description of revolution explains it as a phenomenon that is not merely structural, but intellectual as well. The effects of revolution reach far beyond the confines of a political system and directly impact every citizen of a country.

Any discussion of revolution would be incomplete without considering the works of Karl Marx. In *The Communist Manifesto*, which he wrote in collaboration with Friedrich Engels, he declared that Communists “openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions.”<sup>6</sup> In this explanation of revolution, it is necessary for absolutely every aspect of society to be entirely altered in order for a revolution to have been carried out. This explanation also expresses a need for force to be used in order for the revolution to be a successful one.

These differing explanations of revolution exemplify the notion that a revolution is indeed a more vague concept than it may seem. Revolutions have been discussed for thousands of years, yet no specific set of parameters have been allocated in regards to what a revolution actually is. Modern scholars, however, do agree that complete revolutions involve three types of changes: political, economic, and social. These three changes are what differentiate revolts and uprisings from true revolutions.



## THE CHINA CASE

There have been so few legitimate revolutions in which change has occurred in a country's political, economic, and social sectors simultaneously that the term "revolution" has frequently been attributed to events where only one or two of these alterations occur. The Chinese Revolution is no exception to this incorrect generalization. In China's case, there have been two "revolutions," which is a unique occurrence. The 1911 Revolution, also known as the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命) focused entirely on changing the political spectrum. The 1949 Revolution is not actually referred to as a revolution by the Chinese people. They call it 解放战争, which means the War of Liberation. They acknowledge that although the events that occurred were a movement for change, change did not occur in all facets necessary for it to be considered a revolution.

The Xinhai Revolution fundamentally altered the course of China's future in many regards. It resulted in the collapse of China's dynastic system, which had existed for over 2,000 years, and forced China to restructure its political system. As the unsuccessful Qing Dynasty was brought to an end, China established the Provisional Government of the Republic of China (中華民國臨時政府). The Provisional Government of the Republic of China was instituted in 1912 as a direct consequence of the Xinhai Revolution. Under this new system of government, a president was to be elected by representatives from the different provinces of China. This electoral system was a considerable change from the previous dynastic system. However, Sun Yat-sen (孫逸仙), who won the election, famously informed the Chinese people, "The revolution is not yet completed. All my comrades must struggle on." Sun Yat-sen was aware that there were many more aspects of Chinese society that needed to be altered in order for a full, successful revolution to have taken place.

In 1949, another marked political change took place in China as a result of the latter half of the Chinese Civil War. In April of 1949, the People's Liberation Army (中国人民解放军) successfully occupied the Presidential Palace in Nanjing. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong (毛澤東) declared China as the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國). The People's Republic of China replaced the Provincial Government of the Republic of China with a one-party, communist state. Once again, China saw a significant alteration of its political and governmental structure. By 1950, China had transformed from a dynastic society, to a semi-democracy, to a communist nation. Although not as sudden as its political transformation, this so-called War of Liberation also brought about significant economic changes. The War of Liberation paved the way for Deng Xiaoping's (鄧小平) economic reforms. Deng Xiaoping was a Communist reformer who was a highly influential leader in the reconstruction of China's economy in the 1960s following the Great Leap Forward and again in the 1980s with the opening of China's markets. Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms, "there has been a legalization of some private commerce and trade, and some private ownership, particularly in the service industries."<sup>7</sup> It is apparent that China saw a tremendous amount of political as well as economic transformations after 1911, but it is equally apparent that it did not see such transformations in its social structure. It is clear that China is, and has been, in need of social restructuring.

## DESIRE AND HOPE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Change tends to come about when the need for it becomes so glaring that it cannot be avoided. Social alterations were not instituted as results of the changes that took place in 1911 and 1949, which is why these events cannot be considered revolutions. A social restructuring is the missing piece of the Chinese Revolution, which may be a part of China's near future. Diverse nations



require a sense of cohesion, which does not exist in China. China is a nation with a population of 1.3 billion people, which are comprised of 56 recognized ethnic groups, who speak 292 living languages (中语).<sup>8</sup> When certain groups receive societal privileges that others do not, it naturally results in tension. Tensions tend to have a breaking point and China's may come sooner than its government could predict.

In order to predict what may cause a third and final Chinese Revolution, it is essential to look at what have historically been the causes of revolutions. "It has been argued that revolutions occur because of (1) demand for change, which is itself the result of (a) widespread provocation and (b) solidified public opinion; and (2) a hopefulness of change, which is itself the result of (a) a popular program and (b) trusted leadership."<sup>9</sup> These criteria need to be met, but other factors are also necessary. These other factors cannot be defined and are entirely situational. "The decisive factor may be conflict within one of the conservative classes or disagreement among them. (In the French Revolution, for example, not only were the clergy and the nobility divided within themselves, but the nobility also were in conflict with the king)."<sup>10</sup> Other factors could also include a fractured or weak military, drastic foreign policy shifts, or unsuccessful reform. Any of these determinants in combination with the other two broad causes of revolution would spark a powerful movement for change.

As previously stated, revolutions are inspired by a demand and hope for change. Chinese minority groups (少数民族) have been moving towards this demand and hope for many years. Of China's 56 ethnic groups, there is one majority group, the Han, and 55 other minority groups. Throughout history these minority groups have been regarded as inferior to the Han majority. Until recently, however, many of these groups were largely uneducated, which hindered their ability to come to class-consciousness. Today, on the other hand, the Chinese government has been working to

educate these people, which may be working to the government's detriment.

### CHINESE ETHNIC MINORITIES

Although Confucian ideology is one that has a significant influence in China, "contemporary Confucian scholars have said very little about the ethnic minority question and minority rights."<sup>11</sup> It is interesting how a way of thinking that permeates Chinese culture has no direct influence on policymaking in regards to ethnic minorities. Confucianism, or the "School of the Scholars (儒家)," seeks social harmony. If modern Confucian scholars were to address minority rights, it would be necessary for the government to significantly alter its treatment of these groups, which is appears unready to do.

The Hui and Uyghur groups are two of the largest minority ethnic groups in China and their cases represent the treatment of minority groups on a broad scale. Aside from being one of the largest minority groups, the Hui is also the largest of the ten Muslim ethnic groups in China. They are comprised of descendants of Central Asian, Persian, and Arab Muslim immigrants who intermarried with the Han. "The Hui are concentrated primarily in the northwest provinces of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu and Qinghai, with considerable numbers dispersed in the provinces of Henan, Hebei, Shandong, Yunnan, and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous region."<sup>12</sup> The Uyghur people (维吾尔) are a Turkic Muslim group, who live predominantly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区). Confucian ideology and Islam are so fundamentally different, that it would be expected for challenges to arise when the two attempt coexistence.

Between 1911 and 1949, the Chinese government attempted to resolve Muslim alienation. Sun Yat-sen made efforts to integrate the Muslim minority groups into Chinese society. "Sun's Doctrine of Nationalism included all of China's Muslims under the designation of Hui, and declared that all were



Han Chinese who had adopted the Islamic faith and were different only in customs from the greater Han majority.”<sup>13</sup> Despite this declaration, the Hui people did not experience peace throughout this time period. They fought with the Turkic Muslims of Xinjiang as well as the Han Chinese. Matters only worsened for the Hui after 1949. Muslim institutions and organizations throughout China were shut down in the 1950s and in the 1960s the government banned the *hajj*. Mao Zedong’s Red Guards (红卫兵) lashed out violently against Muslims. “They formed the Revolutionary Study Group for the Abolition of Islam, which called for forcing Muslims to marry Han, the closing of all mosques, sending the Ahaongs to work in the field, prohibiting Muslims from reading the Qur’an, abolishing circumcision, cancelling Muslim holidays, dispersing all Islamic organizations and replacing traditional Muslim burial practices with cremation.”<sup>14</sup>

Though many of the larger minority groups are comprised of Muslims, there are many non-Muslim minority groups in China as well. A group that further exemplifies the inferior treatment of minorities is Mongolians. After the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, Inner Mongolia was ruled by warlords and the Chinese Nationalist Party (中國國民黨) government. “By 1928, the very name, Inner Mongolia disappeared from the Chinese map.”<sup>15</sup> The government in the mid twentieth century was split in its attitude toward Inner Mongolia. “The Chinese Nationalist Party (中國國民黨) (GMD), committed to Chinese nationalism and the unification of China, rejected all Mongolian demands for autonomy. The Chinese Communists, locked in civil war with the GMD, viewed the Mongolian strive for autonomy sympathetically.”<sup>16</sup> In 1947 the Mongolians overthrew the warlords and the Chinese Nationalist Party with assistance of the Chinese Communist Party. However, even after the changes that began in 1949 tensions remained. “Class struggle again became the main approach

to national integration; state unity and nationality solidarity were the criteria to judge a minority’s loyalty to the Chinese State.”<sup>17</sup>

These are merely three examples of the 55 ethnic minority groups in China who have been oppressed throughout history and are still being oppressed today. Ethnic laws have been instituted, but unsuccessfully. The aims of these laws are to “(1) reverse the traditional Chinese pattern of marginalization and subordination of non-Han peoples and (2) construct a minority elite whose loyalty is essential to political stability.”<sup>18</sup> However, “PRC commentators acknowledge ethnic law has not eliminated interethnic and minority-state contradictions.”<sup>19</sup> Although the PRC has outwardly recognized that there is a problem, aside from putting it on paper, nothing has actually been done to rectify the issue.

#### DISTRIBUTION OF BASIC PUBLIC SERVICES

Over sixty years after the political and economic changes began taking place in 1949, there has still been limited reform in the social sector. This is especially true in the case of the minority groups. It is natural that *some* social changes have taken place over this long span of time, but it is clear that they are typically mere results of the economic reforms. “The extent to which continued strong economic growth will foster broad-band improvements in the lives of the Chinese population will largely depend on [public service sector] reforms, which are among the key challenges confronting China at this time.”<sup>20</sup>

While the aforementioned problems in regards to minority groups were historical, these groups are still are confronting serious problems today. Typically, an urban-rural divide is discussed in reference to China. It is important to note that the Han majority tends to be the people living in urban areas, while the minority groups are living in the rural areas. The United Nations Development Programme sites lack of equal access to “primary education public health, basic social insurance and public employment services” as “one of the

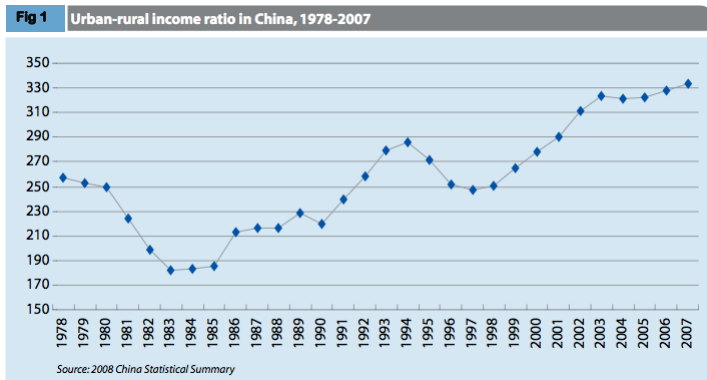




central causes of the gaps in [Chinese] development.”<sup>21</sup>

#### Income

A recent trend that has been occurring is a rapidly increasing income gap between the urban Han majority and the rural minorities. “The urban-rural income gap widened from 2.79 to 1 in 2000 to 3.33 to 1 in 2007.”<sup>22</sup> This trend is indicated by the following figure:



The United Nations Development Programme reports that “it has been estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the full income gap has been attributed to the unequal distribution of public services expenditures.”<sup>23</sup> Low-income households tend to be unable to “afford important services provided by the Government, so they benefit less than higher income

households, who can afford all public services provided by the Government.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the income gap deepens even further.

#### Healthcare

Despite the fact that healthcare expenditures increased substantially in both urban and rural areas from 1990 to 2006, the urban-rural gap has continued to expand. It is important to note that medical costs tend to be universal through the country, even though the average income in rural areas is only one-third of that in urban areas. A study conducted with the United Nations in 2003 found that “about 60 percent of total governmental spending on health flowed to urban areas serving just 30 percent of the total population, while only 40 percent of spending reached rural areas.”<sup>25</sup> The following charts indicate the disparity in medical treatment available between urban and rural Chinese citizens:

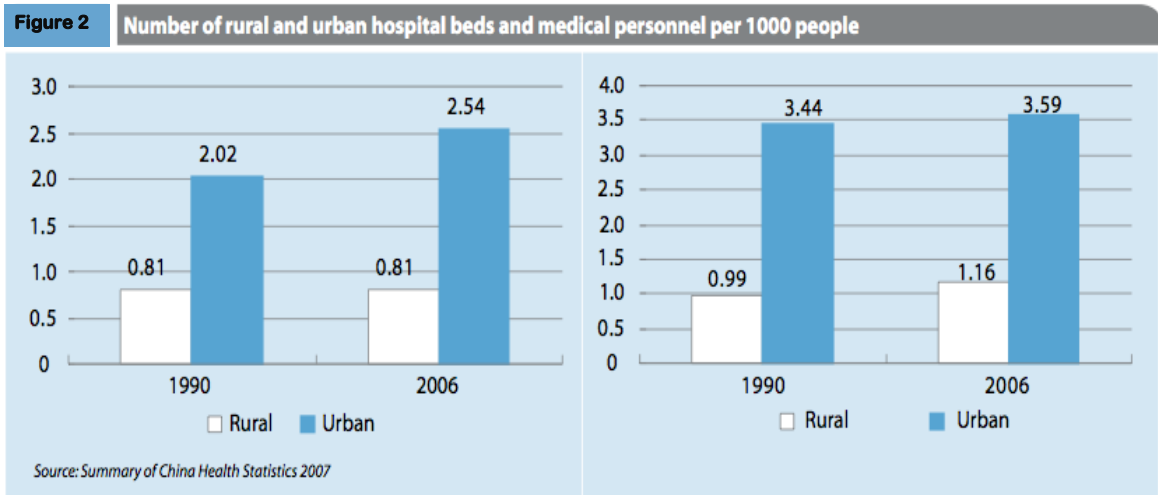


Table 1 Number of Medical Equipment in Urban and Rural Area in 2006				
	Total	Less than 500,000 Yuan	Between 500,000 and 1 million Yuan	Above 1 million Yuan
Total	1,821,750	1,715,858	65,433	40,459
Cities	1,482,649	1,393,167	53,844	35,638
Counties(rural)	339,101	322,691	11,589	4,821

### Basic Social Security

Basic social security is one of the most fundamental public services and is blatantly maldistributed in China. Many aspects of basic social security are new to China and others are under reform. Old age, medical, unemployment, and work-related injury insurance have been first introduced and reformed in urban areas before ever reaching the rural areas. "For example, workers' old-age insurance has been set up in urban areas, but has not taken functional shape in rural areas. The minimum living allowance and various social aid systems started in cities in the 1990s, but they were extended to rural areas only in 2007."<sup>26</sup> These facts solidify the notion that those living in rural areas, who are typically minority groups, are at a societal disadvantage over the majority Han, living in urban areas.

### EDUCATION: THE EXCEPTION

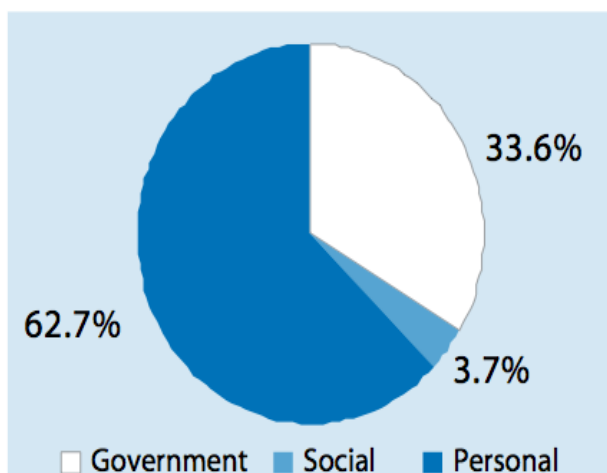
Despite the lack of funding for and improvement in many public services in rural areas, the Chinese government has made efforts to ameliorate education for minority groups. Significant educational improvements have been made in both rural and urban areas in China over the past thirty years. "The number of undergraduate and graduate students in China has been growing at approximately 30 per cent per year since 1999, and the number of graduate at all levels of higher education in China has approximately quadrupled in the last six years."<sup>27</sup> It is understandable that of the public services in China, priority would be given to education. Education could be considered the first stepping-stone to making improvements in other sectors, such as health. Improvements in health occur directly as the result of increased levels of education. For example, knowledge of diseases and their causes is the prime way of preventing the proliferation of diseases. Education tends to promote higher standards of living in a country by providing individuals with knowledge and skills that are necessary to function productively in society. "Poor education limits

capacities and pushes offspring into the vicious circle of low income leading to low investment in education, leading to the poor capacity to make a livelihood, and leading back to low income."<sup>28</sup>

A high value has been placed on education in China, which is by no means a new phenomenon; it has been in existence for hundreds of years. Today, reforms have been instituted in order to promote its expansions. Today, China "has the largest student population and the largest education system in the world."<sup>29</sup> Academia was able to flourish in China as the result of the government encouraging the privatization of education. Previously, "bureaucratic walls were erected around academia to contain possible nongovernmental influences."<sup>30</sup> After Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, however, the government encouraged "business enterprises, private institutions, and even foreign institutions to support academic programs in existing educational institutions or to sponsor new academic institutions."<sup>31</sup> The government, especially under Zhu Rongji (朱镕基) in the 1990s, strongly encouraged the rapid growth of academia. The following chart expresses the shift in funding for education in China:

**Figure 3**

**Education funding in 2002 (%)**



Source: The urban investigation team of the National Bureau of Statistics: *Education Fund Contributions in China, China's National Conditions and National Strength, 2005.*

"After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the Chinese leadership embraced the notion that education is the essential tool for economic modernization and must meet the needs of China's modernizing economy and its future development."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, investment in education has been on the rise. "In 1976, funds from the central budget for education were only 7.5 billion Yuan or 2 percent of annual GDP; this figure increased 60-fold to 453.1 billion Yuan in 2005, comprising 2.5 percent of the country's vastly expanded GDP."<sup>33</sup> In order to become an important economic player in the globalized world, the Chinese government has regarded academic improvements as essential. "China has achieved nearly universal nine-year compulsory education in both rural and urban areas, remarkable feat."<sup>34</sup> Enrolment has increased at all education levels throughout China, as dropout rates are dropping. The following chart indicates the rapidly increasing adult literacy rate in China:

million primary and middle-school students in the western region and parts of the central region of China,"<sup>36</sup> which is largely populated by ethnic minority groups. A year later, in 2007, efforts were made to reduce the cost of education for children in rural areas, such as providing textbooks free of charge and subsidies to students at boarding schools. Another important advancement is that "the female illiteracy rate has dropped rapidly since the 1990s, and the gap in average length of schooling between men and women has decreased."<sup>37</sup> As Mao Zedong famously proclaimed, "Women hold up half the sky," emphasizing the importance of gender equality for a successful society.

Although education rates have increased significantly, the rural-urban gap is still apparent in the returns on education. This implies that there may be drastic differences in the quality of education between rural and urban areas. "In 2002, the expected increase in annual income for

**Figure 4** Adult literacy rate, 1996-2006 (%)



Unlike the other basic services, education has permeated from urban areas in China to rural areas as well. "In 2006, 70 percent of the Government's new expenditures went [to rural areas]."<sup>35</sup> In the same year, free compulsory education also significantly expanded to reach "52

one additional year of education for a rural individual with seven years of education (the average) would have been 87 Yuan per year, whereas the expected increase for an urban individual with seven years of education would have been 460 Yuan."<sup>38</sup> It could be deduced from





these statistics that the quality of education in rural areas must be inferior to the quality of education in urban areas.

### LOOMING CHANGE

Large-scale changes brought about by civilians are frequently led by an educated vanguard. This occurs due to the fact that those who are educated realize their situation and understand how to go about changing it. It is interesting, therefore, that the Chinese government has concentrated on fixing the educational system for ethnic minority groups in rural areas before other basic services. These ethnic minority groups have been historically oppressed. Today they experience a disadvantage in terms of access to basic public services, which are readily available to the Han majority in urban areas, but not available or of lesser quality in rural areas.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen wide-scale changes in many nations. Strikes and protests have spread throughout the world, especially during the Arab Spring, to bring about significant change. Though China attempted to

cancel out information about these events, their effects have managed to infiltrate the so-called Great Firewall of China. Main causes of foreign influence on movements for change include the large amounts of foreign direct investment and joint ventures in China. "Many foreign companies, mostly from Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, are based in Southern China,"<sup>39</sup> such as the Taiwanese firm Foxconn in Shenzhen, which is a supplier for Dell, Apple, and Nokia. The company's employees in Shenzhen decided to protest their six-day workweeks, thirteen-hour workdays, and unfair wages. Employees protested with a series of suicides, which forced the firm to improve working conditions and raise wages. Thousands of workers at other foreign-based firms in China, such as Honda and Toyota, have also initiated strikes in support of wage increases.

These strikes are small-scale examples of the desire for change among disgruntled rural workers. The "high price [many paid] in the form of arrest, disappearance, and beatings"<sup>40</sup> reflect their hope for change, despite the struggles they may face. Mao Zedong said, "Where there is oppression, there is resistance,"<sup>41</sup> which may have been a foreshadowing of a completion of the Chinese Revolution. As the rural Chinese people become more educated and more frustrated with their position in society, they are becoming more and more motivated to make a push for change.

### CONCLUSION

It is clear that the ethnic minority groups in China have both a desire and a hope for societal change. The first two Chinese "revolutions" failed to successfully change and improve Chinese society, while focusing solely on the government and economy. As the oppressed rural groups are becoming more educated, while no other aspects of society are changing, they are being pushed to the brink of igniting a revolution. In order to prevent a revolution, the Chinese government needs to realize this problem. If the government made greater efforts to end the oppression of



Mao's  
Statue in  
Lijiang

minority groups and provide them with equal access to services such as fair income, higher quality medical care, and social security another revolution could be avoided. If these changes are not instituted in the near future, however, it is highly probable that China will see a completion of its revolution very soon.

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