

Ethnicity and Diversity in China with Dr. Morris Rossabi (part 1)

Welcome back to Asia Society's online China course. I'm John Major. With me today is Professor Morris Rossabi of Queens College of the City University of New York, America's acknowledged foremost expert on Mongolia. Today we will be talking about issues of ethnicity and diversity in China.

John Major: Morris, if you go to a history museum in China, you will quickly find labels that say China has five thousand years of history or eight thousand years of history, or some very large number. You also see that anything found within the present borders of China is described as Chinese. Now, is that an accurate assessment that China has always been the way it is now, and has always been full of Chinese people?

Morris Rossabi: I think that is somewhat of an illusion. I would not say a fabrication, but an illusion. China developed over the centuries and incorporated and absorbed a whole series of different territories and different peoples and did not start the way it looks today in its huge splendor. In fact, much of the territory of present-day China only became part of China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; one-sixth of the total territory of China today really became part of China only in the 1750s during the rule of the Qing, a non-Chinese dynasty. So in effect, there has been a gradual colonial policy on the part of China over the centuries and over the millennia.

Major: Now, even if you go back to early historical times, say, the Zhou dynasty in the first millennium BCE, in the text there you see the names of lots of different people. You have the Dongyi, the Miao, and the Hu, and the Jiang and lots of others. Are those pejorative terms? Did they all translate as barbarians?

Rossabi: They did not all translate as barbarians, but often-times there are parts of the [Chinese] characters which sometimes are pejorative.¹ Nonetheless, they were different peoples who were not part of the Chinese cultural sphere. They were taken into the Chinese cultural sphere over the millennium, but at that point in history, they were not part. In fact, they were at various times quite hostile. In the eighth century BCE, one of these groups actually succeeded in taking over the capital city of the earlier Zhou dynasty, forcing it to migrate to another capital. One other indication that tells you that there was a kind of differentiation between the Chinese and others was the fact that many times Chinese cities had walls built around them. The people who lived within the walls were presumably culturally Chinese and those beyond the walls were not necessarily part of the Chinese cultural sphere.

Major: So these were genuine ethnic groups with their own languages and their own customs existing within the territory that we now call China?

Rossabi: Absolutely. They had their own languages. The Chinese often remarked in their histories from that time forward that, in some cases, they could not communicate with these so-called minority groups.

Major: Now around 1940 or so, as you know well, Owen Lattimore published his famous book *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, in which he proposed that the northern and western frontier regions became zones of contention and differentiation between pastoral peoples and agricultural peoples. Is that analysis still considered valid?

¹ Chinese characters most often are made up of two components, a pictographic and a phonetic component. In many cases, the terms for these groups used the pictographic component associated with "barbarian" along side the phonetic component that gives us the pronunciation.

Rossabi: In many cases, it still is believed in and approved of by most historians of the pastoral steppe peoples and, by contrast, by those who focus on China. There was competition for land to a certain extent. Commercial disputes created problems between the Chinese and the nomads that have to do with a specific kind of economic relationship. Pastoral nomadism is a very fragile kind of economy; oftentimes, pastoral peoples find themselves in difficult circumstances because of weather and climatic conditions. They don't have the kind of food storage possibilities that would keep them going when there is a crisis of some sort in their economy. So they were very dependent for food and other supplies from China. They also often did not develop a craft class, a class of artisans, so any kind of manufactured product [had to] come from China. There was a kind of imbalanced economic relationship between the Chinese and the pastoral nomadic people that sometimes led to conflict.

Major: So there was sometimes a peaceful trading relationship and sometimes a hostile one. Is that what lies behind the Great Wall?

Rossabi: Well, there is some dispute at the moment among scholars as to whether there actually was a Great Wall, but there certainly were walls across the northern and western frontiers of China that were presumably built to keep the so-called barbarians out and the pastoral nomadic peoples from invading, raiding, or attacking Chinese border settlements. Lattimore himself, towards the end of his career, believed that the walls were built for quite a different reason - not to keep the barbarians out but to keep the Chinese in. He pointed out that if a so-called barbarian, non-Chinese group sought to actually conquer and rule China, they needed the advice and help of the Chinese defectors. If the Chinese and nomads fraternized, and the Chinese became impressed with a particular charismatic nomadic leader and joined him and provided him with the administrative skills he required, he would be even more dangerous for China than the occasional transgressions, raids, or attacks. From his standpoint, Lattimore introduced this hypothesis that the walls were set up to keep the Chinese in and keep them from fraternizing with the pastoral nomadic people.

Major: That's fascinating. Of course it is certainly true that with the Mongol conquest of China, they had a lot of Chinese advisors telling them how to run a Chinese-style administration and not just come in and loot and carry away what they could put on their horses.

Rossabi: Absolutely. Without the help of these Chinese advisors and counselors (and actually other nationalities as well were brought in, Central Asian Muslims, Persians and so on), the Mongols could not really have ruled China for close to a century. They certainly could not have set up the proper tax system, conducted censuses, or ran the government properly without the kind of logistical and administrative support provided by the Chinese and others. There is absolutely no way they could have established a real dynasty [to rule] over China.

Major: Let's turn back to look within China again for a minute to pick up on the various ethnicities within the area that is clearly the Chinese heartland. How did those people fare in the face of an expanding Chinese political system and an expanding Chinese population? Were they absorbed? Were they co-opted? Were they removed? What happened to them?

Rossabi: Well, it varied with each specific group and each specific territory. Generally speaking, the Chinese had more difficulty in dealing with the peoples to the north—in absorbing and bringing peace along the northern frontiers. Turkic people, Mongolian people, Tungusic people (Tungusic people include people like the Manchu and other Manchu-speaking or Tungusic-speaking groups) were much more difficult to deal with than the peoples in the south and the southwest. In some cases, the people were absorbed; they were Sinocized. They either were attracted by the Chinese civilization and the supposedly luxurious lifestyle led by the Chinese or by the more secure, safe kind of structure that the Chinese had developed. They joined in and became absorbed in the Chinese culture. [But] some did not, even if

they came into China at a certain point as rulers. One would think that as a small minority being surrounded by a large Chinese population they would be absorbed, that there would be considerable intermarriage, and that these people would disappear. In some cases that did happen, but in many cases it did not. Certainly, the evidence of the Mongols and the Manchus initially seems to attest to the fact that these people were able to sustain themselves. Now that does not mean they always had political control. The Chinese sometimes would have jurisdiction over them, set up protectorates or whatever, but they were able to sustain themselves and sustain their culture in many cases.

Major: Now, you've mentioned the Manchus a couple of times. They conquered and put an end to the Ming Dynasty and established their own rule. How conscious were they of the examples of the Mongols or of the Jurchens², earlier still? What kind of lessons did they learn from other conquest dynasties to help with their own success?

Rossabi: Well, I think in terms of their own survival as a distinct group, they initiated certain policies to protect themselves and protect Manchu culture. For one thing, they pretty much closed off Manchuria to Chinese colonization and kept that as a Manchu preserve in order to preserve the Manchurian cultural heritage. In addition, they clearly differentiated between themselves and the Chinese by forcing the Chinese to adopt a queue and by distinguishing their own women from Chinese women by not adopting the practice of bound feet, which the Chinese women had. There were significant attempts to sustain themselves. On the other hand, they also recognized that in order to rule China they had to adopt many Chinese institutions, and they did, in fact, adopt these institutions, such as the civil service examination system; the kind of governmental structure that existed in China for some centuries was also implemented by the Manchus. So it was a combination of both an attempt to preserve the traditional culture and yet make some accommodations to Chinese culture in order to rule.

Major: It was a bilingual dynasty, wasn't it?

Rossabi: That's right. They had wanted to preserve the Manchu language; that was another feature of their effort to preserve Manchu culture. Many of the documents found in government archives, in Taipei and Beijing and so on, were written in both Manchu and Chinese. The one area in which they differed from China was in the area of expansion. In the traditional Chinese dynasties, there was a kind of injunction of some the emperors and ministers to keep within reason and not expand beyond the Chinese cultural sphere. The first Ming emperor, for example, issued a directive to his advisors and ministers that they ought to keep within the Chinese cultural area. The Manchus transgressed that directive and expanded the empire to its greatest extent in history.

Major: I heard it said in explanation of this long-term Chinese cultural tendency to stay within the sphere of China that it has to do in part with dietary preferences: once you get beyond the core Chinese cultural area, it becomes harder to eat a typical Chinese diet of cooked grain and vegetables and other cut up things. You begin to get into the land of cheese, and yogurt, and meat, which were characteristically regarded as unpalatable by most Chinese.

Rossabi: Absolutely. The Chinese diet differs considerably from the diet of the so-called barbarians and the people along the northern frontiers of China, and they found it unappealing. They found the lifestyle of these so-called barbarians unappealing and would often include in their descriptions of these people in the dynastic histories and other private histories insulting remarks about the lifestyle and customs of the people of the northern frontier.

Major: Does that relate to the Chinese notion of themselves as the Middle Kingdom as a culturally central people in comparison to whom everyone else is on the periphery?

² Tungusic peoples occupying the area of Manchuria; predecessors to the Manchus.

Rossabi: Absolutely. The Chinese perceive themselves that way and in part one can see their point. They had a written language at a very early stage in their history and the people they dealt with along the northern and southern frontiers did not have written languages. [Written] Mongolian only developed in the thirteenth century, which is relatively late. The Manchu written language only developed in the seventeenth century. So they would naturally perceive themselves to be culturally superior from that standpoint. They had spectacular buildings, palaces, and residences, while people along the frontiers often lived... in tents and didn't set up too many permanent structures until relatively late in their history. Again, a feeling developed among the Chinese that, in a sense, they were much more advanced than the people around them. That cemented the conception that China was the central kingdom and that the Chinese emperor was superior to all other rulers.

Major: One way that was expressed, I guess, was in the so-called tribute system that regulated trade (or at least official trade) between China and the peripheral areas. Can you describe that?

Rossabi: The tribute system was initiated at first as a kind of defensive posture on the part of the Chinese, but eventually it became a means of dealing with these foreigners, the idea being that China was the central kingdom and the Chinese emperor was really the central ruler in the world, particularly in the East Asian world at that point. If you wanted to deal with China, you had to accept those basic principles. In addition, you had certain obligations as a kind of vassal of the Chinese throne. You would send periodic tributes of rare and precious goods from your culture to be presented to the emperor. Then you would appear on the frontier and be taken by officials to the capital city, wherever it may be in that particular dynasty. Then you were prepared for an imperial audience and the officials ensured that you understood that the rituals required in meeting the emperor signaled the fact that you as a foreigner, as well as your ruler, were inferior to the Chinese emperor. You would come to the palace and have an audience with the emperor and present your rare and precious goods. Because he was a generous, magnanimous ruler, he would provide you with gifts in return. Often-times the gifts would be much more lavish than the gifts that you provided. Once that ended, then you could really get to what you were interested in as a foreigner, and that was trade. You were allowed a number of days in which to trade with officially designated Chinese merchants and you pretty much got what you wanted. The result was, under the system, that there was relative peace for China in many periods of Chinese history when China was able to maintain this tribute system.

Major: But then in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Manchus changed their minds. Instead of having this distant relationship with peripheral people—the trade relationship, the tribute relationship—they decided to go out and conquer them. What lay behind this assembly of a much larger empire than China had ever known before?

Rossabi: Well, in part because they were foreigners, the Manchus didn't have to abide by the same injunctions that some of the Chinese emperors had about keeping within the Chinese cultural sphere. That was one factor. The second factor was a fear that, just as they had emerged as a group that invaded and conquered China, somebody else would come on the scene. They faced a number of major antagonists, particularly among the Mongols: Mongol Khan, who in the late seventeenth century challenged the Manchus' control over parts of northwest China. They crushed his [the Khan's] forces in the last decade of the seventeenth century, but some of the forces managed to escape and wound up in Tibet. That gave them a convenient pretext to invade Tibet in order to get rid of these Mongols who might at some point challenge the Qing Dynasty, the Manchu Dynasty. Again, they succeeded in that in the early part of the eighteenth century. They found a detachment of these Mongols who ended up in Xinjiang in northwest China and again that provided a pretext for the invasion of that territory. So by the time that all of this ends in the middle of the 1750s, China has incorporated an enormous amount of territory, relatively underpopulated, but still an enormous amount of territory, including Inner Mongolia, which they had gotten in the early part of the seventeenth century. Mongolia

became a protectorate, then Xinjiang in northwest China, and finally Tibet. So it was a set of circumstances, as well as a different attitude towards foreigners, that prompted the Manchus to expand.

Major: So this incorporates into China a fair number of people who historically had not been regarded as Chinese: people, who spoke Turkic, Mongolian, Tibetan, and other languages as well. That legacy is still with us. All of those languages are still spoken in those territories.

Rossabi: Absolutely. And I did not mention the southwest. The southwestern region was also brought in or incorporated by the Manchus. There were a number of revolts in southwest China by some of minority groups and that territory, too, was pacified by the Manchus by the middle of the eighteenth century. So you have a large number of languages [in China], Southeast Asian languages and north Asian languages, such as Mongol, Turkish, and Tibetan, as well. The legacy that that has been brought forward is something the Chinese have had to reckon with and they have done a fair job, I would say. There have been some difficulties, obviously.