

## Ethnicity and Diversity in China with Dr. Morris Rossabi (part 2)

**John Major:** How many languages approximately, are spoken regularly in China today?

**Morris Rossabi:** Wow, well, there are just dozens and dozens. They have identified 56 nationalities, including the Han, the dominant nationality, what we call the Chinese. That doesn't really include the variety of Southeast Asian languages that are spoken in China; if you include that, it is an astonishing number. The major [non-Han-] languages, of course, are a couple of Southeast Asian languages, like Thai, and Uighur (that is a Turkic language), Mongolian in Inner Mongolia, and Tibetan of course. Then, there are quite a few languages that are spoken by a relatively small number of people.

**Major:** What percentage of the population is non-Chinese speaking?

**Rossabi:** At the moment, it is about 8%. It has gone up slightly because of the one child per family regulation that was initiated in 1980. The regulation is that Han people, [ethnic] Chinese people, were limited in the cities to having one child.<sup>1</sup> But the same did not apply to the minorities and so the minorities were able to have more children. In any case, there was a tradition among the Turkic peoples and the Mongols to have relatively large families, so that has increased the size of the so-called minority nationalities somewhat over the past 25 years.

**Major:** Still, that means the minority people, taken in aggregate, are outnumbered almost 12 to 1. What is the status of minorities in China? Is it a peacefully multi-cultural society or are there strains?

**Rossabi:** There have been strains since 1949, since the People's Republic of China was founded. The violence and radicalism of the so-called Great Leap Forward, from 1958 to 1962, and again of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to the middle 1970s, did impinge upon the minority nationalities. There was an effort made to force the minority nationalities to adopt the Chinese written language, to abandon some of their traditional practices, and some of their traditional religions. That led to some violence in parts of the country and some migration out of the country: about 60,000 or so Kazaks left China during the Great Leap Forward and moved to Kazakhstan, then part of the Soviet Union. Similarly, a certain amount of violence persists, or persisted up until the 1990s, and until later among some of these minority nationalities. The Chinese Communists simply assumed that at some point the minority nationalities would blend in and that there would be considerable intermarriage. But so far, many of the minorities have been able to retain their traditional culture and not much intermarriage has actually taken place, particularly among the people along the frontiers. That is what really concerns the Chinese, because the minorities are strategically located in important frontier areas. In the case of Xinjiang, adjacent initially to the Soviet Union, during the Sino-Soviet Dispute<sup>2</sup> there was concern about the security and the loyalty of the Chinese and minority nationalities within China—[particularly] the Muslims. Then, with the break up of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of Central Asian republics (mostly Muslim republics and mostly Turkic people who are quite similar to the minorities in China and who in some cases share the same language and cultural heritage), there was concern on the part of the Chinese about too much fraternization between the minorities within China and the independent Central Asian countries.

**Major:** Though in Manchuria, the population is overwhelmingly Han Chinese and has been for decades now. In Inner Mongolia, I believe there is a Han Chinese, majority although in the countryside there are still a lot of Mongols. Is that a deliberate policy, of essentially swamping the minorities on the frontier areas?

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese in the countryside have been allowed for some years to have a second child only if the first one is a girl.

<sup>2</sup> The Sino-Soviet Dispute, or Split, lasted from roughly 1960-1968.

**Rossabi:** It appears to be, but it preceded the People's Republic of China. There was already migration into both Manchuria and Inner Mongolia towards the last phase of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been accelerated, particularly in terms of Inner Mongolia: since 1947, when the Chinese Communists took power in Inner Mongolia, there has been continuous Chinese migration into that area. In terms of Xinjiang, it certainly was a deliberate policy in the initial stages of the Communist Revolution. In the beginning stages, around 1949 and 1950, there were very few Chinese in Xinjiang. At the moment it is about 50/50, half Chinese and half Turkic and other minority peoples. In Tibet, again, there has been a decided increase in the number of Chinese since the founding of the People's Republic in Tibet. In theory, in the beginning of the People's Republic in all of these areas, it was not a voluntary migration, apparently: they were settled there by the government. But there are now attractions—economic attractions and incentives in Inner Mongolia, in Tibet, in Xinjiang, and in the southwest as well that pull Chinese into the area. There has been a growing amount of investment on the part of the Chinese government in these minority areas since 1990, and that has led many Chinese to move into the area.

**Major:** What has been the response of the indigenous people to this large-scale migration?

**Rossabi:** Well, in some areas it has been accepted and there hasn't been too much of a fracas, or too many conflicts. In the southwest, by and large it has been relatively peaceful. There is some animosity, some hostility, but it hasn't erupted into armed conflict. In Inner Mongolia, the number of Chinese so vastly outnumbers the number of Mongols by this time that it is unlikely that this situation will change. There is still great bitterness on the part of some Mongolian nationalists about the arrival of so many Chinese since 1947, but what they can do about it is difficult to tell. They have been given some authority – some government officials are Mongols – but the preponderant official class and economic class is still the Chinese. Xinjiang is a different story. You still have considerable animosity and it has erupted into violence in the 1990s: bombings, reports of battles between nationalists, or people who want greater autonomy for the local people, and the Chinese troops.

**Major:** Not only in the border areas but all throughout China, wherever there are minorities, there is a mechanism for handling minority affairs, the National Minorities Institute. What is that about?

**Rossabi:** When the Chinese took power, they followed in theory the policies developed by the Soviet Union in terms of their minorities. They promised to maintain the culture of these various minorities and not to impede their rituals and languages and so on. The national minority commissions and institutes were set up presumably to provide support for their cultural heritage. But in fact they often act as agents of the Chinese government, colluding with the Chinese government in terms of its policies towards the so-called minority nationalities. There is also the Chinese Islamic Association, to deal specifically with the Muslims. There is a Chinese Buddhist Association which deals primarily with Buddhist within China, but also Buddhists in minority areas. Often-times the leaders of these organizations are very loyal to the government and are very ardent implementers of government policies, as opposed to policies that might benefit their own minority peoples.

**Major:** I have heard the National Minority Institute compared to the American Bureau of Indian Affairs, and if that is a reasonable comparison, then it does not [bode] well for the minority people. After all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has had a long and unfortunate record of forced assimilation of Native Americans. So if there is any hint of that in China, it would speak badly for Chinese policy and for the prospects for survival of some of the smaller minorities.

**Rossabi:** Yes. It does appear from evidence that we have from anthropologists and others that some of these traditions are dying out. In some cases, the local people are being somewhat exoticized for the larger Chinese audience, appearing

in local dress as entertainment for Chinese tourists in some of these areas., but whether their culture is being sustained is a different matter. Maybe they wear these costumes and jewelry and so on and so forth, but whether their native religions, their native ideas, and their native heritage is being sustained is quite different.

**Major:** We see that in Taiwan that has been true for a long time with the so-called aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, who are Malayo-Polynesian people. They are trotted out in local dress to entertain at dinner performances and restaurants and that kind of thing, but there doesn't seem to be much culture left behind that.

**Rossabi:** The same thing is true in the southwestern region of China. They are trotted out the same way to entertain the tourists and put on sort of cultural performances with music, dance, and traditional costumes. Whether there is content behind that superficial kind of entertainment seems to me to be at least somewhat challenging, I would say.

**Major:** If you look at the map of China and look carefully, you will see that there are quite a large number of areas that are designated as autonomous counties or autonomous regions of one kind or another. Is there any content to that concept of autonomy, then? What does that mean in terms of minority peoples?

**Rossabi:** Well, I think that the autonomous concept was developed in the early stages of Communist rule. It has sometimes been implemented, but largely not. Often-times, the real leadership and power in these autonomous districts or republics was often in the hands of Han Chinese, rather than native folk, or if native folk are employed, they tend to be people that the Han government trust not to create problems for them, no trouble-makers who would insist on maintaining the local culture and [having local people play] a greater role politically, economically, and so on. We find that even in the areas where there has been effort on the part of the Chinese to invest in some of these minority areas, often the people who get the funding are the Chinese, not necessarily the local minority people.

**Major:** I believe it is true that a majority of economic activity in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, is now in Chinese hands.

**Rossabi:** Yes, absolutely. There are some [economic] booms, sort of minor and mini booms, if you want to call them such, in the minority areas including Lhasa, [Tibet] and in Xinjiang, but they've mostly benefited the Han migrants into these areas rather than the local folks. In fact, this is attested to by Chinese records. A number of scholars, political scientists, and anthropologists have plotted where the investment goes in Xinjiang and have found that the Chinese government's investment largely goes to Chinese entrepreneurs, rather than to local people.

**Major:** Well, this again is something that is not confined to China; we have seen this in many parts of the world. Now all of the minority peoples are citizens of the People's Republic of China, is that correct?

**Rossabi:** That's correct.

**Major:** So it raises an interesting question of what it means to be Chinese. I can think of at least three versions of that: a citizen of the People's Republic of China, an ethnic Han Chinese in China, or anyone of Chinese ancestry in the world. How do you sort that out?

**Rossabi:** That is a serious problem; you cannot figure out what they mean. Let me give you an example of a critical misidentification by the People's Republic. One of the 56 groups is a group known as the Hui, who are basically ethnically Chinese, but just happen to be Muslims. Now, are they a minority group because of their religion? They are ethnically no different from the Chinese, they speak Chinese, they do not have their own language, and yet they are classified as a minority nationality, essentially on the basis of their religion. It is a very curious kind of thing and leads to

the confusion that you spotlighted about how to identify people. Are they Han people who are citizens of China? Are they ethnic minority people who are citizens of China as well? There is a curious vagueness to this kind of labeling.