

## Ideas and Beliefs with Dr. Morris Rossabi (part 3)

**John Major:** So really if you look back over the long term of Chinese history that there's a strange sense of continuity here. We talked about China as being multiethnic and multivocal in very ancient times and, even though Chinese culture has been very expansive and very vigorous for thousands of years, minority peoples have managed to hang on to their cultures, to their languages to their identity for all of that time. It seems quite remarkable that it should be so.

**Morris Rossabi:** It is amazing that so many minority nationalities—the Chinese count as 55 different minority groups—have been able to survive for that long. The question is, as you [China] have a more powerful state, as you have a mass media that can reach all segments of the population and can seek to [inculcate] new kinds of values into minority nationalities, is that more of a threat than was the case earlier, when you didn't have these tools [available] for governments and societies seeking to incorporate minority nationalities into the larger Han nationality?

**Major:** Are the minority peoples also participating in the world-wide homogenization of popular culture, or the Americanization of popular culture? Is that another threat to ethnic identity in China?

**Rossabi:** Absolutely. There is an increasing emphasis and an increasing exposure to this kind of globalization and also to Chinese civilization. They do learn Chinese language in order to get ahead in China. You've got to know the language. That, in and of itself, erodes the kind of identity that they've been able to retain for several centuries... or millennia, in some cases. Whether they'll be able to persist in their native identities and heritage—faced with globalization, faced with pressure from [the Chinese government]—I'm not sure. It will be interesting to see in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Major:** Now the Chinese, by any definition, whether Han or minority, are certainly conscious of the role of China as the "Middle Kingdom," as a place that has a particular role in the universe; a kind of centrality that is psychological as well as political. As China becomes more of an international player, economically and politically, do you see an ethnic consciousness on the part of the Chinese as being a factor in China's relations with the rest of the world?

**Rossabi:** I think so. I can see that happening. [The Chinese] were humiliated for a hundred years during the period when they were pretty much under the control of the West, or influenced by the West, after the Opium War and up until the founding of the People's Republic of China. They don't want to be in the same boat again. They want to assert themselves as a great player as they once were in traditional times. Chinese dynasties—the Tang Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty and the Song Dynasty—were some of the greatest civilizations in the world at those times. Many Chinese aspire to that kind of renewed position in the world. What that will do, it's hard to say.

I was coincidentally asked by a foundation to take Chinese doctors to see a particular program that had been developed in Kyrgyzstan as a model for their culture. I responded that the Chinese have higher aspirations; they want to be compared to Europe, to America. They wouldn't necessarily want to be compared to Kyrgyzstan. It would be a mistake to compare them to a third world country from their standpoint. (It had to do with Xinjiang, where the foundation wanted to do some work and the foundation had felt the people of Xinjiang were similar to the people of Kyrgyzstan.) Why not bring the Chinese doctors to this area? I don't think the Chinese would go for that at all.

**Major:** And what you do get now is the consciousness of the boundaries of China. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century empire, which was really something quite new for China, is now taken as the natural physical expanse of China, that every square inch of that territory is somehow sacred Chinese soil.

**Rossabi:** I've had occasions where Chinese students or Chinese at lectures or speeches I've given lay claim to even a larger territory that was part of China during the Han Dynasty, or Tang Dynasty, or whatever. Perhaps that's the way history is taught in China, that during the Han Dynasty, China was an expansion toward Samarkand, and so on.

**Major:** So this sounds like a real resurgence of cultural nationalism in China.

**Rossabi:** Yes, I think so. Whether it will persist... As China gains more self-confidence they may not need these myths that they've generated about China in its early stages of history, being as grand as they portray it today, incorporating much of Central Asia. I think as they gain in self-confidence, they'll realize that perhaps some of the historical information that they're purveying may not be suitable and may not be accurate.

**Major:** Well, we'll hope that kind of stability settles in. That will be in everyone's interest.

**Rossabi:** Absolutely.

**Major:** Morris, whether Muslims are Hui or Uighur or some other ethnicity, Islam seems to be a considerable presence in China. Is that increasing? Is there an Islamic movement of any kind in China? What's the status of Islam?

**Rossabi:** Islam has been found in China since the Tang Dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, perhaps even [since] the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The largest single group of Muslims are found on the northwestern frontier. There are Muslims— obviously the Hui, or ethnically Chinese Muslims—are found throughout the country, everywhere from Beijing to Guangzhou to lots of other places. The place where Islam could be perceived as a religion that could galvanize the population is primarily in the northwest. It has been so in the case of China since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Islam served as a binding force in a series of rebellions against Qing rule. These were major rebellions in which thousands of people were killed; one lasted for almost twenty years in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Religion still plays an important role; whether it's been eroded somewhat by the propaganda, and the kinds of education that the People's Republic has initiated over the past 50 years, is difficult to tell. There are still some people who are quite religious. It's certainly possible that Islam could reemerge as a vibrant force in China. My own feeling is that the ethnic tensions are much more of a significant factor in terms of perhaps future turbulence in the relationship between the Chinese and the peoples of the northwest than Islam.

**Major:** Now as I understand it, despite the official atheism of communist China, one of the provisions of the national minorities laws are that the minorities are to be unrestricted in their practice of religion. Are there other minorities that are associated with other religions? Certainly in Tibet...

**Rossabi:** Tibet, of course, practices Tibetan Buddhism. Even in Mongolia—Inner Mongolia—Mongolians are Tibetan Buddhists, so Tibetan Buddhism has a significant constituency. Again, the evidence is tricky on that score. Some of the major Tibetan specialists believe that Tibetan Buddhism has a powerful force or is a powerful force on the population. Others believe that economic and ethnic issues dividing the Chinese and the Tibetans are paramount. It's difficult to tell whether the Buddhist element is going to be a factor in relations between the Chinese and Tibet or whether it will be the kind of economic discrimination or ethnic discrimination by the government against Tibetans.

**Major:** These religious issues will be more difficult to sort out because there's been a resurgence of religion among the Han Chinese as well: Christianity, Daoism, Buddhism, and a whole variety of new religions.

**Rossabi:** Absolutely. There's been resurgence since the opening up of China in the late 1970s and early 80s, in some of the traditional religions, and with many more people going to Buddhist temples; also, many more Christian churches are

opening up, underground Christian churches as well. It's difficult to tell how pervasive these [tendencies] are and how much influence they will have on the long run.

**Major:** But in any case, it seems the linkages that may have been there between religion and ethnicity are, if not weaker, at least more complicated.

**Rossabi:** More complicated. Yes, absolutely, much more complicated than meets the eye. When one labels people either with religion or ethnicity, it gets quite complicated. You have to look at each group and determine which is the paramount issue motivating action.

**Major:** One final observation I'd like to hear your view on is, looking from the outside, many people think of China as a very homogenous place: lots of Chinese are like many other Chinese. From our conversation, it seems like there's tremendous diversity. Not just ethnic diversity, but diversity of a variety of sorts that might not be immediately apparent.

**Rossabi:** It's ethnic diversity, religious diversity, and even among the Han—we haven't talked too much about the diversity within the Han population, which constitutes 92% of the total population of China—there are differences in custom, there are differences obviously in dialect, differences in lifestyle, livelihood. And those kinds of differences subvert the idea that China was some homogenous entity in some homogenous culture throughout its history. It's a kind of misnomer to speak about China being a homogenous culture throughout its history and having a few minorities here and there. The Chinese themselves were quite different in many ways.

**Major:** Morris, thank you so much for being here. This was wonderful.