

# ***The Veil and Ethnic Relations in China***

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I take the liberty of quoting some words by Zhang Chengzhi (張承志) who once pronounced literature untranslatable.

Zhang is a Chinese Muslim writer. He grew up in a Hui family in Beijing. The Hui are one of the 56 ethnicities that make up the population of China and are traditionally believers of Islam. Unlike other ethnic minorities, they do not have their own language, and share many cultural aspects with the Han majority.

Zhang was raised as an atheist in the turbulent 1950s and 1960s. By some accounts, he coined the term “Red Guard” as he and his classmates took the lead in the young rebels’ movement in the 1960s.

During the Cultural Revolution, he lived for four years on the Northwest frontier with an Inner Mongolian family. From there he emerged as a powerful storyteller of the spirit and culture “beyond the Great Wall.”

Trained as an archaeologist and ethnographer, in 1984 he moved to Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in China's Northwest. He lived for six years with the Muslims of Xihaigu—a place so poor that it is described as being “not suitable for human habitation,” according to UN’s World Food Programme.

In 1987, Zhang converted to an impoverished, Sufi branch of Chinese Islam, the Jahriyya. It was a period of relative openness. He spoke freely of his Muslim faith, and worshipped openly.

“Wealth and power were easy to come by in that era. All one had to do was to pretend that things that were too terrible did not happen.”

But he said: “if I did that, I would not be clean. A Muslim strives to be clean, at least clean at heart.”

In 1989 he quit his position as senior creative writer in the Navy (ideological warfare?), and director of the China Writers’ Association.

Zhang's stance is unusual. Fiercely independent, and unwavering in his regard for Mao Zedong, he is also a prominent Chinese advocate for global Islam.

### **Zhang's Essay, the Veil**

In the essay, *The Veil*, he wrote of two visits he once paid to a Uyghur family. The first time, the woman wore a loose black silk robe and a brown headdress covered her head. The veil moved slightly when she spoke or breathed.

"The veil separated the two peoples; I thought the best way was to face the barrier casually, and look for a topic that both peoples like," he wrote.

Respectfully he asked if wearing a veil, she would permit him to take a photo with her. That picture is now a prized possession.

A year later, Zhang came on an unannounced visit, this time with the woman's husband.

He wrote, "What mattered though, a rabbit named 'trust' has crept in between host and guest, it brought inexplicable joy."

They took more pictures. The husband broke into a *hamd* (song in praise of Allah); the daughter was not veiled. "Her hair tied into a bun with a red kerchief; the father's silvery beard; the mother covered by a brown veil—they each looked different."

Some months after Zhang returned to Beijing, a letter came. He tore open the envelope—a full portrait of mother and daughter dropped into his hand.

"She was not covered by a veil, dressed in a new coat, she stood quietly, a pair of deep, desolate eyes staring at me. This is a middle-aged Uyghur woman, ordinary and modest, such as one encounters often. For a moment, I felt a strong tremor; my heart swelled with an indescribable emotion," Zhang recounted.

"The way she expressed herself was a total surprise, ... she took off her veil, to convey a solemn trust. I gazed at the typical Uyghur face in the photo, but it was like I could see how they felt."

"Indeed, in front of someone trustworthy, the veil can be removed. The veil is only a woman's tradition, only a cultural tradition. When you know how to respect this tradition, the veil will be lifted for you."

## **Ethnic Minorities**

China's ethnic minorities make up about 8.5 percent or 113.8 million of the total population (2010 census). They live in 50 to 60 percent of the country, many spread out in remote areas in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Hunan, Heilungjiang and Liaoning.

Some of the larger ethnic groups are: Zhuang (16 million), Hui and Manchu (each 10 million), Miao (9 million), Uyghur, (8 million), Mongol (6 million), Tibetan (5 million).

From its founding, the People's Republic of China has declared regional autonomy for ethnic minorities a basic policy. It was a practical way of keeping the nation together. Not only had they been living cheek by jowl for centuries, the state argued, "all the ethnic groups of China were faced with the common task and destiny of struggling against imperialism and feudalism and striving for national liberation."

Four autonomous regions were set up in the 1950s and 1960s: the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region; the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and the Tibet Autonomous Region.

In 1984, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Ethnic Regional Autonomy was promulgated, laying out the political, economic and cultural rights and duties of ethnic autonomous areas.

## **Preferential Treatment**

The *National Minorities Policy and its Practice in China*, published by the State Council in 2000, counted many ways ethnic minorities received equal or better treatment, compared with the Han majority.

Minority peoples are represented in the National People's Congress (over 14 percent of all delegates), exceeding their actual numbers (8.5 percent of the nation's population).

The Law protects freedom of religious belief for ethnic minorities and guarantees all normal religious activities of ethnic minorities citizens. Tibetans and Mongolians, for example, can follow Tibetan Buddhism; Hui, Uyghur, among other ethnic groups,

can practise Islam; and some Miao and Yao people in the southwest carry on their Christian faith.

All ethnic groups in China have the right to use and develop their own spoken and written languages. The state has even trained researchers to help minority peoples create, improve or reform their written languages.

The spoken and written languages of national minorities are to be widely used in judicial, administrative and educational fields, as well as in political activities and social life.

Education should also be autonomous. Self-governing bodies in autonomous areas may decide their own type of education (schools, curriculum, language of instruction, and so on) based on their ethnic characteristics and within the state education policies and laws.

Before 1949, the illiteracy rate in Ningxia was more than 95 percent. There was no institution of higher learning. By 1998, there were 6,100 different kinds of schools in Ningxia, with a total of 1.3 million students. There are at least nine institutions of higher learning. 89.5 percent of the people are now literate.

There is also significant improvement in health care. For example, the life span of Tibetans has increased to 65 years from 36 in 1959. The infant mortality rate in Tibet dropped from 43 to 3.7 percent. The life span of the people of Ningxia has increased to 69 from 30 before 1949.

### **Great Western Development Strategy**

China has not stopped building spectacular railroads and highways, or stoking iron and steel, petrochemicals, energy, and mining industries in minority areas. For example, the Qinghai-Tibet railway continues to extend new rail lines; the West-East Natural Gas and Power Transmission Projects do just that.

The Great Western Development Strategy (*Xibu Da Kaifa* 西部大開發) was launched in 2000. Later plans added new energy, new materials, biotechnology, aerospace, and information technology as key industries for development.

Inspired by the success of coastal cities, some capital cities with large minority populations, e.g., Urumqi, Nanning, Kunming,

Hohhot, Yinchuan, Xining, and Guiyang, have been named “inland open cities.” Some will become entrepôts in the “one belt, one road” initiative.

In the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), China has set itself the task of lifting more than 70 million people out of poverty. Minorities stand to gain, as nearly half of poverty counties are ethnic minority counties.

With such an outpouring of investments and an outlook of prosperity, why are ethnic tensions on the rise in China?

### **“Why Don’t They Love Us?”**

Minorities are wary of the millions of Han settlers whose education and overland connections seem to give them an edge in jobs, trade, and education opportunities. They see the many development projects, often state-sponsored, as siphoning off resources from their regions to line interior pockets .

The Han settlers, meanwhile, complain about lax implementation of the law. Negative perceptions of minorities as backward, dishonest, and violent burrow deeper.

Well-meaning policies such as “bilingual education,” when put into practice, bypass minority languages in favour of the Han language. Urban renewal as in the destruction of the old city of Kashgar (majority Uyghur) breaks up old communities and ways of life.

Minorities see their cultures, including religious rights, as coming under assault.

A longtime observer of minorities affairs, Yao Xinyung, names the problems: 1) authoritarianism wedded to runaway capitalism produces one-sided development, corruption, and widespread inequality; 2) a system of government that allows for no policy discussion or disagreement in the public sphere fuels resentment; 3) fake regional autonomy fails to cultivate political unity and cultural diversity.

The solution is a “democratic process” that lives out the values of the Constitution. Failing that, a kind of nationalism based on cultural identity can turn viral and radical, both on the ground and in cyberspace.

Luo Fuyung, the director of the Cyberspace Administration in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, swore recently to win the battle of online anti-terrorist security-maintenance “with a firm hand.”

A heavy hand will not lift the veil between ethnic cultures. I wish to end with the story of another visit. The two were cousins ...

When Mary ran to the hill country to visit Elizabeth, perhaps for refuge, perhaps to give aid, both women were with child—full of the promise of a new life that sets free. Both were filled with the Holy Spirit, and Mary broke into a song of praise (see Luke 1:39-56).