

## *Editorial*

A young Han Chinese who lived for years among the Uygur minority people of Xinjiang has said: "If we treated them better, our relations with them would be better. It's not enough to have a policy towards them; we must make a conscious effort to deepen our understanding of them."

The United Nations estimates that of the 200 million indigenous peoples in the world, 150 million are in Asia, and 67 million of them live in China. To promote a better understanding and appreciation of their cultures, ways of life and problems, the UN declared 1993 the Year of the Indigenous Peoples. This issue of *Tripod* is in response to that concern.

China is one of the few countries of the world that has formulated a definition of what constitutes an indigenous group within the context of national union, but it is generally acknowledged that indigenous groups are descendants of a people who in the past were conquered by an outside force. As such, minorities still see themselves as distinct from the larger society surrounding them. While they may live on land that is often fertile, rich in minerals and strategically well-placed, they are often among the country's poorest of the poor, going without proper food for as much as half the year and having limited access to water, electricity and good transportation facilities. Furthermore, minorities are burdened as well with the struggle to preserve their traditions, customs and unique identity against constant encroachments by the country's dominant majority, the Han Chinese.

One of the key problems confronting the minorities in China today is the attitude that the Han Chinese have towards them. It has always been a part of the Han hegemony to make efforts to "civilize the barbarians" within its borders, and so the tendency of the Chinese government has been to treat the minorities accordingly. But if the Han tend to regard the minorities as backward, primitive, and poor--an economic burden to the State, they also harbour a certain fascination for minority peoples' customs and ways, which seem unfettered and free when compared to the constrictions imposed by the strict social codes of their own traditional society.

The Han Chinese government also faults the minorities for their lack of commitment to revolutionary goals. They have shown little interest in Communism with its class conflicts and economic struggles that grip China's vast urban populations. Nor did they seek Han help during the Japanese occupation. Instead, they resisted government encroachments on their land and made little effort to involve themselves in Han plans for the area's development. The Han people continue to see China as a unified whole, while the minorities are eager to determine their own future for themselves. They seek to deal with the government on a basis of equality. This kind of attitude makes the government nervous, and any talk of independence is judged to be counter-revolutionary and a threat to national unity.

There are, however, signs of a new sensitivity on the part of the government toward minority interests, opinions and problems. The State Nationalities Affairs Commission has warned writers and editors when dealing with minority issues to be "very careful in what they say and to avoid provoking any misunderstanding." And the government is always quick to point out recent signs of progress and improvement. The authorities use a carrot and stick approach, at times, kind and conciliatory, at times threatening and intolerant. At best its attitude may be described as patronizing: willing to make compromises but always maintaining firm control. This is especially important since many of the minorities live in the strategic areas along China's borders where disorder and agitation could seriously weaken the nation's defenses, and divert much time, energy and labour away from more important national problems.

Within China today, minorities are receiving a great deal of media exposure. Open up any issue of the *Beijing Review* or *China Today* and you will be greeted by clusters of colourful pictures depicting smiling, happy groups of people dressed in exotic costumes, singing, dancing, or engaged in charming courtship rites and other such festivities. The statement made is both positive and political. And the minority peoples are also a definite asset to the country's growing tourist industry. Yet despite all this, serious problems do remain.

As China shifts into overdrive along the road to modernization, there are valid fears among minority peoples of the loss of traditional values, the destruction of their environment and the dissipation of their once closely-knit communities. In fact,

everywhere, peoples who have lived in harmony with nature for centuries, who hold the land in reverence and respect, and who have lived in peace for generations within their communities are being threatened with extinction. It is indeed a global responsibility to improve living conditions among the minorities, but not at the price of destroying their cultures, traditions and unique identity. The words of the United Nation's Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali are very much to the point here: "In respecting [the indigenous peoples], in defending them, in helping them to take their place in the community of nations and in international life, it is perhaps the world itself that we are protecting, according to the view that we have of this very diverse world. And ultimately, we will be protecting every culture, every people, every unique being and, in the final analysis, each of us is that unique being."

This issue of *Tripod* presents different viewpoints and information relative to various nationalities in China. Chen Li offers a critique of the efforts made in the past by Christian missionaries to evangelize the minorities of the Southwest. Our *Personality* is an elderly priest who in two letters gives a moving account of his efforts to bring the message of the Gospel to the Miao people. In quite a different vein, our *Documentation* section includes three separate documents: a proposal made by the Underground Bishops' Conference regarding the conditions for normalizing relations with the Vatican; two decrees of the State Council: *Regulations Regarding Religious Activities by Foreigners within the Boundaries of the People's Republic of China* and *Regulations Regarding the Management of Places of Religious Activity*. Anthony Lam offers a commentary on the bishops' suggestions while Father John Tong comments on the regulations regarding activities by foreigners. Also included is the *1993 Tripod Index, News in Brief* and a Book Review of Orbis Books' recent publication, *The Catholic Church in Modern China, Perspectives*.

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