

## ***Some Facts About China's Ethnic Minorities***

*Compiled by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.,  
and Michael Sloboda, M.M.*

### **China's Definition of Ethnic Minority**

China is one of the very few countries throughout the world that has an official definition of *ethnic group*. China defines an ethnic group as a "nationality". In order to qualify as an "nationality", the group must possess its own language, share blood and traditions, "possess a common psychological sentiment" and reside historically and presently in a defined territory (*Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups in China, New Asia Academic Bulletin, Vol. VIII, 1989*).

### **China, Land of Many Peoples**

Apart from the Han, China lists 55 nationalities. The Han, who constitute 92% of China's total population and who are usually referred to as Chinese, are the product of the Huaxia nationality and the assimilation of many other nationalities. The name is derived from their dynasty. The Han ruled from 202 BC to 220 AD. The other 55 different minority groups make up only 8.04% of the total population but inhabit 64.5% of the land area of the mountains, high plateaus, grazing lands and forest and border areas.

Although nationalities tend to live in frontier provinces and regions, 70% of China's cities and counties are ethnically mixed (BR., Dec. 24-30, 1990).

### **Religion among Minority Nationalities**

It is estimated that there are some 100,000,000 Buddhists in China. Some 4,600,000 Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism. The Uygur, who arrived in Gansu Province around the ninth century, and were in contact with their Tibetan neighbors, soon became adherents of the Yellow Hat sect of Lamanism. Buddhism also penetrated every level of Mongolian Society. In

fact, at one time in Mongolian history, Buddhism exerted such a powerful influence that it is estimated that approximately half of the male Mongol population became monks. Since their particular sect was the Yellow Hat, these men remained celibate. Many attribute the decline in the Mongolian population to this phenomenon. Other groups in the Northwestern and Northeastern provinces who practice Buddhism are the Daur, the Xibe, some of the Tu and some Korean. In the South, Central and Southeastern areas of China, where adherents to Buddhism are much fewer, Tibetan Buddhism is practiced mainly by the Moinbas. Other Buddhists among the ethnic groups are more likely to belong to the Theravada Buddhist sect.

Islam has had a presence in China as far back as the 8th century and gained great power especially during the Yuan dynasty, (1271-1368) under the Mongol Empire. It is the preferred religion among ten of China's fifty-five ethnic minorities. Almost all the Huis, the largest of all of China's Northwestern minorities, with an estimated population of nearly 8,600,000, are Muslim. Other Islam followers are the Dongxiang, the Salar, the Bonan, the Uygur, Kazak, Kirgiz, the Tajik, the Uzbek, and the Tatar. There is no significant number of Muslims among the other minorities.

Christianity, in both its Catholic and Protestant forms, has made some inroads among ethnic minorities. There is a significant concentration of Christians among the Korean, Miao and the Bai nationalities. Nine other groups also have Christian adherents with the majority of these professing the Protestant faith.

As would be expected the Russian minority group belongs to the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Shamanism has a long history in China and has been practiced in various forms. Even today among minorities, many villages have a shaman. There are good and evil shamans who can be either men or women. Evil shamans are used for revenge on one's enemies while good shamans attend to ceremonies, provide consultation, act as healers and keep in touch with the spirit world. In the Northeast and Northwest provinces Shamanism, in some form, is practiced among the Daur, the Ewenki, the Xibe, the Henzhen and the Manchu. Even some Hui practice shamanism. Shamanism is not so prevalent among the ethnic nationalities of Central and Southeastern China.

There are, of course, among all these peoples, vestiges of other forms of worship such as Polytheism, popular among at least 25 minority groups; ancestor worship prevalent among eight groups, and nature worship which is still present among the Achang, Blang and Lhoba of Southwest China. Taoism, usually listed along with Confucianism and Buddhism, as one of the three main religions of China, is not widely practiced among the minority nationalities.

The following information, taken from the 1990 census as published in the *Beijing Review* of December 24-30, 1990, provides the names of all minority nationalities (Hans not included) along with their population and religious preferences.

### Religious Preference and Population among 21 Ethnic Minorities of Northwestern and Northeastern China

<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Preference</u>
Bonan	12,212	Islam
Daur	121,357	Shamanism, Buddhism
Dongxiang	373,872	Islam
Ewenki	26,315	Shamanism, Buddhism
Hezhen	4,200	Shamanism
Hui	8,602,978	Islam and Shamanism
Kazak	1,111,718	Islam
Kirgiz	141,549	Islam
Korean	1,920,597	Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism
Manchu	9,821,180	Shamanism
Mongol	4,806,849	Tibetan Buddhism
Oroqen	6,965	Shamanism, Ancestor worship
Russian	13,504	Eastern Orthodox Church
Salar	87,697	Islam
Tajik	33,538	Islam
Tatar	4,873	Islam
Tu	191,624	Tibetan Buddhism, Polytheism,
Uygur	7,214,431	Islam

Uzbek	14,502	Islam
Xibe	172,8470	Ancestor worship, Shamanism, Buddhism
Yugur	12,297	Buddhism

**Religious Preference and Population among the 25 Ethnic Minorities of Southwest China**

<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Preference</u>
Achang	27,708	Nature worship, Hinanyana Buddhism
Bai	1,594,827	Polytheism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism
Blang	82,280	Nature worship, Theravada Buddhism
Bouyei	2,545,059	Polytheism, Taoism
Dai	1,025,128	Theravada Buddhism
De'ang	15,462	Hinanyana Buddhism
Dong	2,514,014	Polytheism, Ancestor worship
Drung	5,816	Polytheism, Protestantism, Catholicism
Gelo	437,997	Polytheism, Ancestor worship
Hani	1,253,952	Polytheism, Ancestor worship
Jingpo	119,209	Polytheism, Protestantism
Jino	18,021	Polytheism, Ancestor worship
Lahu	411,476	Polytheism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism
Lhoba	2,312	Nature worship
Lisu	574,856	Polytheism, Protestantism, Catholicism
Miao	7,398,035	Polytheism, Protestantism, Catholicism
Moinba	7,475	Tibetan Buddhism
Naxi	278,009	Dongba Fetishism, Taoism, Protestantism
Nu	27,123	Polytheism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism
Pumi	29,657	Polytheism, Buddhism, Taoism

Qiang	198,252	Polytheism, Buddhism
Shui	345,993	Polytheism
Tibetan	4,593,330	Tibetan Buddhism
Va	351,974	Polytheism, Theravada Buddhism, Protestantism
Yi	6,572,173	Polytheism, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism

### **Religious Preference and Population among the 9 Ethnic Minorities of Central South and Southeast China**

<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Preference</u>
Gaoshan <sup>1</sup>	2,909	Polytheism, Ancestor worship
Jing	18,915	Polytheism
Li	1,110,900	Polytheism, Protestantism
Maonan	71,968	Polytheism, Taoism
Mulam	159,328	Polytheism, Buddhism, Taoism
She	630,378	Ancestor worship
Tujia	5,704,223	Polytheism, Ancestor worship
Yao	2,134,013	Ancestor worship, Taoism
Zhuang	15,489,630	Polytheism, Buddhism, Taoism

1. There are also 290,000 Goashan in Taiwan with either Catholicism or Protestantism as their religious preference.

### **Status of Ethnic Minorities**

#### ***Equality of Rights***

According to the Chinese government all nationalities enjoy equal rights and duties. In September 1949 the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference took a significant step towards establishing equality. It stipulated, "Regional national autonomy shall be practiced in the areas where people of minority nationalities live in compact communities." Further developments took place in 1951 and 1978. In 1984, the 6th National People's Congress approved the "Law on Regional Autonomy for Minority Nationalities." According to the *People's Republic of China Yearbook 1990/91*, the number of cadres from minority

groups has increased at a rate of 8.2% annually. Since the end of 1989 the chairmanships of all autonomous regions, autonomous prefectures and autonomous counties have been held by people of their respective nationalities.

### ***China's Nationalities Entitled to Use Own Language***

The Chinese Constitution stipulates that every nationality has the freedom and right to preserve, use, reform and develop its own language. Every citizen, no matter what nationality, has the right to use his or her own language in filing a suit. People's courts and procuratorates must find a translator for anyone involved in a case who does not speak the local language, and in a place where minority people live in compact communities or different nationalities live together, courts should try the cases in the language prevailing in the area. Indictments, court verdicts and public notices should be written in the local language or languages (*CT.*, Vol. 40, No. 12, Dec. 1991). The fact that China has more than 80 languages and over 40 kinds of scripts constitutes a major difficulty for any educational system and for society as a whole (*CNA*, No. 1421, Nov. 1, 1990, p. 8).

To date it is estimated that over 110,000,000 books have been printed in minority languages.

### ***Poverty among the Minorities***

Although a great deal of effort is being made to develop education, culture, public health among minority groups, 70% of China's poorest people, who subsist below the poverty line, are to be found in China's 11 westernmost provinces and autonomous regions. Of the 331 officially designated poorest counties in China, 141 are inhabited by minorities. (*CNA* No. 1421, Nov. 1, 1990).

### ***Illiteracy Rampant among Minorities***

China (1990) had over 223 million illiterate people of whom 90% are in villages, minority areas and poor areas. Out of the 55 recognized minority nationalities, 25 have at least one half to two-thirds, above age 12, who are illiterate. The causes of illiteracy can be attributed to:

- the high dropout rate among primary school students;
- the belief that literacy has no value;
- a relapse into illiteracy for lack of use;



To qualify for standard literacy in China a person is required to recognize 1500 Chinese characters (*CNA*, No. 1421, Nov. 1, 1990, p. 7).

In an effort to improve educational opportunities China now has 12 universities with 72 departments for minority students. In 1950 there were 10 (*Mainland China Studies*, Vol. 36 #9, Sept. 1993).

### ***Longevity among the Uygurs***

Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, according the 1982 census, had 865 centenarians: 22.46% of China's total of 3,851. In 1985 Xinjiang ranked among the first four longevity regions in the world. Of China's centenarians, 802 or 92.72 % are of the Uygur nationality and contrary to the rest of the world's population, Uygur men live longer than women. China has teams of expert in a variety of fields trying to solve the mystery of the group as well as the male longevity (*CT*, 5 May 1993).

### **Changing Lifestyles**

With China's new openness and changing economy the lifestyle of many nationalities is changing rapidly. The Kazak, for example, who have been herders for 1,000 years, are now farming land for crops and animal fodder. This change is due to a United nations 100,000,000 RMB grant for this project *CT*, July 1993).

### **The Status of Minority Women**

In 1982, women of the 55 minority nationalities numbered 33.02 million and 44.52 million in 1990, a 34.8% increase. About half of the increase is due to women changing their nationality from Han to various minority nationalities. In 1990 minority women accounted for 8.12% of the country's total of 548.69 million women (*BR*. Vol. 36, #41).

(Ed. Note: Restrictions in the number of children per family are not so stringent among minority groups as they are for the Han. This may be one reason for women to shift their nationality.)

### ***Some Statistical Information***

Social development varies among the different nationalities

and even within the same nationality depending on the regions of residence. In general, the Han are the moving and dynamic force and the group recognized as holding both the power and enjoying the prestige. Information related to minority groups is usually given in terms of a comparison with the Han Chinese. The data below, taken from the *Beijing Review*, is designed to show that in some areas, certain minorities are faring even better than the numerous Han. The statistics are for 1990.

*Female infant mortality per 1000*

Manchu	15.7
Korean	20
Mongolian	25.9
Han	26.8

Some of the female infants in other minority nationalities suffer a death rate of as high as 60 per 1,000. The figures seem high but it is difficult to know how many of these infant deaths are actual or induced through abortions in order to abide by the One-Child policy and also because of the Chinese's preference for boys. Recently, the government has put China's overall infant mortality rate at 14.5 per thousand in the urban areas and 23 per thousand in rural areas.

*Life Expectancy Among Women*

Manchu	73.56
Han	72.29
Hui	72.22
Korean	70.99

(BR. Vol. 36, No. 41)

The Korean woman's life expectancy is four years longer than that of the male Korean. The overall average life expectancy, according to recent government statistics, is 71 years.

*Most Common Occupation among Minority Women*

Agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry and fishing



*Percentage of Women Engaged in Industry and Transportation*

Han	12.6%
Hui	14.9
Korean	16.1

Women of other minorities fall as low as 2.0.

*Percentage of Minority Women in Business*

Han	3.2%
Hui	5.5
Korean	6.8
Manchu	4.1
Mongolian	3.7

*Percentage of Minority Women Working as Professionals and Technicians*

Han	5.5%
Hui	6.9
Kazak	8.0
Korean	14.0
Mongolian	11.6

There has been a significant increase in the number of women from the minorities now engaged as professionals and technicians. In fact, four minority groups now surpass the Han.

*Education in general per 1000 women*

Korean	794.9
Manchu	730.7
Mongolian	653.4
Kazak	677.9
Han	635.6

Other minorities are comparatively low with Tibetan women as the lowest with 169.4 and the Hani with 249 per 1,000.

College Education per every 1,000 minority women

College education:(national average)	5.9
Han	9.0
Koreans	27.6
Mongolians	13.8
Kazak	13.8
Lowest figures among all Nationalities:	
Yi	1.3
Hani	0.8

Illiteracy 1990 - Female

Han	31.2%
Kazak	15.8
Korean	11.1
Manchu	15.9
Mongolians	23.2
Uygurs	28.8

Overall, women's cultural and educational levels are lower than men's for all nationalities (*BR*. Vol. 36, # 41).

**Unrest Among the Minorities**

China lately has given a great deal of publicity to its various minorities, capitalizing on their varied folklore, their colorful festivals and their great value as tourist attractions. There are signs of unrest, however, among some of these groups. The 1993 riots in Tibet are a case in point. The *China News Analysis* provides us with examples of other restive spots. These instances could be multiplied but the following will suffice to present a picture of the actual situation.

In February 1990 in Inner Mongolia, 8,000 herdsmen, farmers, students and workers demonstrated in favour of independence, freedom, democracy and equality. On May 26-28 more than 40,000 people marched in the streets of Hohhot.

From April 5 to 6, 1990, the local government office in Akto County near Kashgar in Xinjiang, was attacked by a group of Muslims chanting the Koran and demanding the establishment of a East Turkestan. The riot was suppressed by force and it is alleged that 22 people were killed (*CNA*, No. 1421, Nov. 1, 1990).

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Year of  
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