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Chinese Ethnicities and Their Culture: An Overview

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Chinese Ethnicities and Their Culture

An Overview

Brief Historical Background

According to a Chinese ethnologist, early Chinese roughly fell into three categories and lived in three distinct regions. They were farmers on the vast plains of Central China who later became the bulk of the ethnic Han, nomadic herdsmen on the northern grasslands, and people who hunted and engaged in primitive farming on the southwestern plateaus. Their interactions have contributed to the evolution of China into a multi-ethnic nation (Zou, 2004).

Classification of Ethnicities

No Chinese government had bothered to define its ethnic peoples in history. In the 1950s, China began "allowing groups to apply for national minority status", (Heber, 1989; Lee, 1997). Although over 400 separate groups applied, only fifty-five received recognition. As a result, some of the recognized minority ethnic groups consist of several branches with different names and varying customs. For example, Mosuo is now part of Naxi. Sani and Ani belong to Yi. And the dozen distinct aborigines in Taiwan are under the name of Gaoshan (High Mountains).

For a long time, many ethnic minorities had hidden their identities to avoid inconveniences. Since China relaxed its social control in the early 1980s, some 12,000,000 have restored their ethnic status. But the 1990 census showed there were still 749,341 Chinese belonging to none of the fifty-six officially recognized groups. They include the 2,000 to 8,000 Jews believed to reside in China today (Gladney, 2004, 9).

There is evidence that Kaifeng, capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126), used to have a large community of Jewish immigrants. But due to isolation and lack of religious experts, they gradually disappeared. Beginning from the 1930s, modern Jewish communities emerged in China. A total of 40,000 had lived in Harbin, Shanghai, and Tianjin. When New China or the People's Republic was established in 1949, the majority of the Jews left the country for other parts of the world.

The number of legal aliens in China has reached 250,000. They further complicate China's ethnic identification. They are from 136 countries, including Japan, Korea, European Union and the United States (Deutsche Welle, 2006).

Policies towards Ethnic Minorities

Since the Han dynasty (202 B.C. – A.D. 220), the Huaxia-dominated governments had tried various policies towards ethnic minorities. The Tang (A.D. 618–907) and the Song (A.D. 960–1279) courts adopted the *jimi* (controlling and winning over) strategy (Zou, 2004). The Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) advocated harmony between Manchu and Han. In the mid 1950s, the concept of ethnic autonomy found its way in the Chinese Constitution. It allows ethnic minorities to have their own leaders. Mark Bender, an East Asian Studies professor from The Ohio State University, observes, "Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, there has been general improvement in the implementation of minority policies, though ethnic tensions simmer in some regions in the west" (Bender, 2006).

Currently, there are five autonomous regions at the provincial level. They are Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, Ningxia, and Xinjiang. There are also thirty autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties, where ethnic minority communities concentrate.

Where relations among ethnic peoples are concerned, subtle changes have long begun. Rizvan Mamet and his colleagues have conducted a research on interethnic marriage. The conventional belief is that Muslims in Xinjiang are more traditional than the Han Chinese and therefore are less likely to marry people of other ethnic groups. The discovery, however, is surprisingly subversive to that perception: “Uyghur females in Xinjiang are 68 percent more likely to marry out than the Han females” (Mamet et al, 2005). The Dai people have no problem with marrying outside of their ethnicity, either. Offspring of the Hans and the Dais now even forms a separate branch of the Dai group: the Han-Dai.

Social behaviors can unconsciously reinforce the harmonious relationship between neighboring ethnic peoples. This is true of the Han and She peoples in Zhejiang. Some Han Chinese customarily put their newborns in a She family for temporary adoption, believing this may enhance the babies’ chance to survive. Despite its lack of scientific proof, this practice has, however, helped foster a closer tie between the two ethnic peoples.

Folktales may shed some light on the harmony enjoyed by different ethnic peoples in China. "Seven Brothers" retold in this book, shows that seven ethnic groups shared the same ancestry. A beautiful tale of an Aini sister and a Dai sister-in-law also illustrates ethnic accord. This tale explains the asymmetrical nature of their clothing: A Dai woman wears a vest and a long skirt while contrarily an Aini girl dresses in a long-sleeved top and a short skirt. According to the tale, the Dai sister-in-law bought a piece of cloth to make a blouse for each. But she accidentally cut a half larger than the other. She made the Aini sister a long-sleeved top and herself a sleeveless vest. When the Aini sister learned of her Dai sister-in-law’s selflessness, she made a short skirt for herself and gave the long skirt to her.

In closing, the Chinese history is one where different peoples came together, broke apart, and came together again. It's true there were suppressions and revolts in history, and there are still sporadic separatist rumblings here and there that may be considered when studying Chinese ethnic minorities. But for the most part, peoples of the various ethnic groups in China have been living fairly peacefully together.

Additional Reading

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Peoples

Population

There were 123,330,000 minority ethnic Chinese in 2005, accounting for 9.44 percent of China's total population (China Popin, 2006). The 2000 census showed that eighteen ethnic minority groups had more than a million people each; fifteen had over 100,000 each; another fifteen each had less than 100,000; and seven each have a population below 10,000. A population of 16,178,811 makes Zhuang the largest of all ethnic minority groups. Lhoba, having only 3,000 people, is the smallest (Census, 2000).

In 1982, the Chinese Government began to enforce planned birth among ethnic minorities. Today, each family of an ethnic minority with less than ten million people is allowed to have up to three children. Planned birth doesn't apply to Tibetans in agricultural and pastoral areas. Neither is it enforced upon the ethnic groups of less than 10,000 people each (People.com, 2001).

As a result of the disparity in family planning policies, ethnic minority populations are growing faster than that of the Han Chinese. In the decade between the fourth census in 1990 and the fifth in 2000, the Han Chinese increased 11.22 percent while the ethnic population rose 16.70 percent (Census, 2000).

Geographic Distribution

Distribution of Chinese ethnic population has the characteristics of what scholars call *xiao jizhong, da fensan* (high level of concentration in specific regions and wide scattering throughout the country). Though accounting for less than 10 percent of China's total population, ethnic minorities are found in a large part of the country. The ethnic Hui scatters nearly all over the country. A single ethnic group like Miao can be found in nine provinces extending from Guizhou to Hainan. The people of Tujia can also be found in four different locations of the country. By 2000, sixteen of the thirty-one Chinese provinces and administrative regions had significantly large ethnic communities. On the other hand, sixteen ethnic groups exist in Yunnan Province only.

Minority Ethnic and Han Chinese also "penetrate" each other's "territories." Forty percent of the She people live in the Han-dominant provinces Jiangxi and Zhejiang in East China. At the same time, the Han population has surpassed that of the Mongols in Inner Mongolia and is going to surpass the Uygurs in Xinjiang (CPG, 2006).

Political upheavals in the past and economic boom today have played a role in the change of ethnic minority populations and in their geographical redistribution. To "garrison the frontier" that bordered Soviet Union, the government sent millions of Han Chinese to the sparsely populated Xinjiang. Zhao Shilin, an ethnologist of Yunnan Nationalities University, gives another example. He finds 101,900 Jingpo people in 1953. But a decade later, the number dropped sharply to 57,800. It took another twenty years to climb back to 93,000. Prof. Zhao explains that China's political turmoil in the 1950's and 60's made it hard for the Jingpos to hang on to their traditions. They had no alternative but to flee to Burma over the border (Zhao, 2002).

In the past three decades, China's economy has been growing tremendously. Its success, however, is far from being equally distributed. Regions along the east coast are much more fortunate than the rest of the country. Economic imbalance and eased migration have caused large numbers of Chinese, ethnic minorities included, to leave their impoverished homelands. According to a study, 10 to 18 percent of the population, mostly of ethnic minorities, in Guizhou,

Chongqing, Hainan and Hebei had moved out between 1900 and 2000. At the same time, ethnic minority population gained significantly in the more developed Shanghai, Guangdong, Beijing, Zhejiang, and Tianjin (Jiang, 2006).

Due to preferential family planning policies, however, population of ethnic minorities has increased in their home regions. So much so that it cancels out its loss to emigration. The ratio of ethnic population has climbed in most of China's provinces and regions. There were 340,580 more Tibetans in 2000 than in 1990 (Jiang, 2006). The seeming deficit in some of the regions is attributed to the influx of Han Chinese.

Continued migration is redrawing the map of demographic distribution of China's ethnic minorities. In 1990, only Beijing had all China's ethnicities. A decade later, ten more regions have followed its suit (Zhou, 2003).

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Languages

The Huis and Manchus speak Mandarin (*Putonghua*) and write Chinese characters (*hanzi*) because they have largely been assimilated into the Han Chinese. The rest of the fifty-five ethnic minorities share over 120 languages, some written and most spoken. There are more languages than ethnicities because people officially categorized as one ethnic group may still have cultural differences. This is true of the Dai people, who speak four varying dialects and write with three different scripts. The Mongols, though speaking the same tongue, have two writing systems.

Generally speaking, the 120 ethnic languages belong to the families of Altaic, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, South Asian, and South Island. Hieroglyphic, syllabic, or alphabetic, they are linguistically Tibetan, Uygur, Arabic, Korean, Thai, Latin, and Slavic.

In China, all languages are equal by law though *Putonghua* (Mandarin) is designated as the national language. The Bill of Ethnic Autonomy asserts that leaders of different ethnic backgrounds working in ethnic regions are encouraged to learn each other's languages. Leaders of ethnic Han are required to learn the language of the ethnic people among whom they work. Bonuses are given to those who can speak more than two ethnic languages (Bill of Autonomous Regions of Ethnic Peoples, 2001).

In the early 1950s, seven teams of linguists visited thirty-three ethnic minorities in sixteen regions to help with their languages. They helped Zhuang, Yi, Buyei, Miao, Dai, Dong, Hani, Lisu, Li, Va, Tu, and Naxi create alphabetic writing systems on a voluntary basis. They also assisted Jingpo, Lahu, Uygur, and Kazak in improving their existing Romanized scripts. As late as 1996, the government standardized the syllabic system for the Yi people. At the same time, China established national standards to encode Mongolian, Tibetan, Yi, Uygur, Kazak, and Kirgiz scripts for computer input. The first two of them had been adopted by International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

The beauty of the ancient *Dongbawen* (scripts of Eastern Ba) has caught the attention of ethno-linguists as well as tourists from home and abroad. Using pictures to represent ideas, it is allegedly older than *Jiaguwen* (oracle-bone scripts) of the Shang dynasty (16th—11th century B.C.), which is the precursor of contemporary Chinese characters.

Another interesting language is *nüshu* (women's scripts). Prof. Gong Zhebing from the Wuhan University first discovered it in the Jiangyong County of the Hunan Province in 1982. Despite its pictographic appearance, *nüshu* is, in fact, a spelling language. As its name shows, it's a language exclusively used by women—women of ethnic Yao and Zhuang. Its origin is disputable. Some linguists trace it to the middle of the 17th century. Others find similarities in *Jiaguwen*. The reason for its creation may be elusive, but it's commonly considered a backlash to male dominance that denied women the right to learn.

Ethnic languages are facing serious challenges. A recent study shows that more than half of the 120 ethnic languages are spoken only by groups of ethnic peoples numbering less than a thousand each. Over twenty are even on the brink of extinction; for none of them is spoken or written by a population above a thousand. Only a dozen Hezhen elders still know how to speak their mother tongue, and less than a hundred Manchus understand theirs. Mu Shihua, a researcher of Naxi nationality at the China Academia of Social Science, complains that in a Naxi family of three generations, only grandparents know how to speak the beautiful Naxi language. Their grandchildren think it will affect their intellectual development and refuse to learn it. The researcher concludes that, like other ethnic youths, the young Naxis, caring very much about

making money, consider the study of their mother tongue to be a waste of their time. Other scholars put the blame on local authorities, saying they emphasize economic development more than ethnic cultural preservation.

However, good news is not in short supply. The largest electronic producer Haier in China has just announced their first television sets with Mongolian menus available. They are on their way to produce television sets with Uygur, Tibetan, and Korean languages as an option in their control menus (*Dongfang Caijing*, 2006).

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Homes

Current waves of economic development in China are quickly washing away traditional buildings in cities and even some rural areas. A pun played on this frenzy is tossed around among foreign residents in Beijing that China has become “chai-ne” (“being demolished”). Indeed everywhere you turn, you can see swiveling cranes towering massive construction sites. A good illustration of a traditional China being demolished is the dwindling numbers of *siheyuan* (a compound of houses surrounding a courtyard), time-honored dwellings of Beijing residents. They are being replaced by western-style high rises. Local governments zealous for higher GDP (Gross Domestic Product) numbers are bent on real property development, oftentimes at the sacrifice of traditional architecture.

Fortunately, Chinese have come to realize the importance of cultural heritage. The China Nationalities Museum in Beijing and the Ethnic Cultural Park in Kunming are making efforts to preserve traditional ethnic homes. They highlight life-size replicas of traditional ethnic homes built by ethnic craftsmen with materials shipped from original ethnic habitats.

Geographic conditions and availability of construction materials generally determine architectural styles of ethnic homes:

- Wood-structured *diaojiailou* (houses on high poles) and *mulengfang* (houses of square timber);
- Stone-structured *shibanfang* (slab houses) and *diaolou* (castle houses);
- Bamboo-structured *ganlan* (pole-railing houses) and *zhulou* (bamboo houses);
- Thatched-wooden structured *qianjiaoliu* (thousand-foot houses) and *chuanlou* (boat-shaped houses);
- Immature-soil structured cave-houses and houses of the Turpan style.

Diaojiailou (houses on high poles) are often built against mountains and along rivers. They are popular among Dong, Miao, Sui, and Tu. While wood poles prop up the façade above the water, the rear part of the structure sits against the mountainside, serving as residential quarters.

Zhulou (bamboo houses) are the home of Dai and Lhoba. Constructed mostly of *zhu* (bamboo), the richest natural resource for home building in South China, *zhulou* houses are thatched with straw and supported by wood columns. More columns are symbolic of more family riches.

The columns are square to deter snakes from climbing up. A thick column in the center of the house is believed to hold the family’s good fortune. Hosts encourage their guests to put their arms around it before their departure as a gesture to share their good luck with them.

A *zhulou* house of Dai has two-stories while that of Lhoba has three. The first storey is used for penning domestic animals; the second, for dwelling; and the top, for storage. The dwelling floor of Dai is dominated by a large living room. It was flanked by a cooking area and a partitioned bedroom. All family members sleep on the same long bed separated only by their mosquito nets of different colors: Black nets are for older people, white ones for the children and grandchildren, and red ones for the newlyweds. As devout Buddhist followers, they cannot imagine how people sleep separately in different rooms: In doing so, they believe, their souls would be separated. *Zhulou* has gone through many changes. Today it’s no longer built solely of bamboo and wood. More and more bricks and concrete are used in place of the natural materials.

If one visits Xishuangbanna, an enclave of the Dai people in Yunnan, one can see *zhulou* houses of bamboo, of half bamboo and half bricks, and of bricks and concrete altogether standing side by side, revealing the evolution of the structure in different stages.

Houses of the Hani people look like mushrooms. That's why they call them *muogufang* (mushroom houses). With earth walls lying as the foundation and bamboo and wood poles supporting a thatched roof, a mushroom house has three storeys, each functioning the same way as that of a bamboo houses does. Floored with planks, the second storey is partitioned into three rooms and has two staircases on opposite sides. The one on the left is for men; and the one on the right, for women. A man who accidentally sets his foot on the wrong staircase would become a laughingstock of his community.

Nomadic Mongols live in circular, domed, portable tents, known to Westerners as yurts. Mongols call them *benbugegeri* (domed houses) or *Mongolegeri* (Mongolian houses). The Han Chinese call them *menggubao*, meaning "homes of the Mongols." A yurt consists of *hana* (wood palings) and *wuni* (wood beams). They prop up a felt cover fastened with leather ropes. A yurt has more space on the inside than it appears from the outside. A hearth sits in the center facing the entrance. Surrounding the hearth against the walls of the yurt stand cupboards and trunks painted with beautiful patterns of Mongolian motif. In front of the furniture lie thick carpets. The carpeted area serves as a living room during the day and a bedroom at night. A yurt doesn't need support inside. Only families of nobility have four elaborately decorated columns at the heart of the yurt. Like Dai people, Mongols also encourage their guests to rub the columns so they can share their good luck.

According to Wang Ping, director of China Nationalities Museum, religious beliefs are also factors in shaping the styles of ethnic homes. A Tibetan house must have a room or recess designated for worshiping.

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Clothing

Traditional clothing has cultural values. It defines ethnic minority groups and even tells different communities from one another within the same group. Forty-seven branches of Yi are dressed in as many as 120 different styles of costumes. This diversity across and within ethnic groups adds to the colorful mosaic of the Chinese culture at large.

Each piece of garment or jewelry tells a story of the ethnic group to which its wearer belongs. Naxi women's sheepskin shawl decorated with a pattern of seven stars has at least a couple of folktales behind it. One, in particular, tells of a young woman's fight against a monster of drought. The monster unleashed eight more suns into the sky trying to destroy the earth and its residents. The young woman fought the monster until her death. Heavenly God bid a snow dragon to swallow seven of the nine suns and turn the eighth into a moon. He then made the dragon throw up the suns and shaped them into stars. To memorize the young woman, he embedded the stars onto the back of her cape.

A woman of a Yi branch may wear a hat shaped like a rooster's comb. A tale goes that the rooster and the centipede used to be friends. They became enemies after the bug refused to return a horn borrowed from the rooster. When their village was infested with centipedes, the Yis took advantage of their enmity and raised many roosters to stamp the pests out. Roosters have since become birds of good luck; and their combs, symbols of good fortune.

Some traditional ethnic clothing may not be as mythical, but they can reveal the origin of an ethnic minority's name. Xibe, for example, means "hooked leather belt." Ethnic Xibe is so called because hooked leather belts are integral parts of their costumes. The Bais call themselves "white people" (*Baini*) and prefer using a lot of white color in their costumes (People's Daily 2002). On the contrary, black dominates the apparel of the Naxis. They associate black color with infinite darkness, which they interpret as invisible (Shiji zaixian 2006). In fact, part of their name "*na*" means black in the Naxi language.

Ethnic costumes are significant in other ways as well. A Tibetan man in his thick robe likes to bare his right arm, a custom that has religious as well as practical reasons. Some believe they do so to model Sakyamuni, founder of Buddhism. Others think it convenient to have an arm free for labor.

Costume patterns and decorative motifs vary from one ethnic people to another. The most distinct feature on a particular piece of garment knitted with white and red yarns is a square pattern on the front of a vest. The pattern is said to be a seal, symbol of authority of the God of Yao, and regarded as a talisman for those who wear it.

Ethnic minority women acquire their skills of embroidery and wax printing when very young. They make costumes not only for their own but also for their children and grandchildren. Mothers usually pass on to their daughters prized costumes and ornaments in hopes that they can carry on the time-honored tradition.

Current Changes

In regions out of reach of commercialism, tradition is largely intact. Elsewhere, however, the younger generation begins to abandon ethnic clothing. Easier transportation and migration expose them to modern fashions like T-shirts and jeans. They wear their ethnic costumes only during festivals or on important occasions like weddings.

On the other hand, changes can be a two-way traffic: Ethnic costumes have had a great

impact on fashion design in China as well as in the world. *Qipao* is a good example. Once a long and loose robe worn by Manchu women, it has become a national fad today with some modifications. Laces of embroidery with ethnic Chinese motifs have also found their way on dresses sold worldwide.

Today, greater attention is given to ethnic costumes not only for preservation, but also for profit. "A full set of original costumes and ornaments can be sold for a million *yuan* (US\$128,500). The average price tag for a tailor-made traditional Tibetan costume ranges between 40,000 and 50,000 *yuan* (US\$4,830-6,038)" (China Daily May 22, 2004). They are expensive because fewer ethnic women know how to make them.

The profit craze is posing a grave danger to traditional ethnic costumes. Some foreign collectors have jumped upon the opportunity first, making the Chinese worry. It's reported that the Japanese National Ethnology Museum alone has collected several thousand sets of Chinese ethnic costumes, some of which can no longer be found in China (Sina.com 1999).

Realizing the value and the uniqueness of their costumes, many of the ethnic communities have built themselves into tourist attractions, bringing in cash and investment to improve their economy. The idea of preserving Chinese ethnic cultures—ethnic clothing and ornaments included—while making a profit is apparently behind the two large ethnology museums/parks in Beijing and Kunming, where tour guides from various ethnic backgrounds showcase their dressing cultures to visitors from home and abroad.

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Religions

Chinese ethnic minorities subscribe to a variety of religions. They include Buddhism, Lamaism, Daoism, Shamanism, Christianity, Catholicism, Orthodox, Islam, and various forms of native folk beliefs.

While some ethnic groups each have a single region, others may have multiple. Chinese Russians have faith in Orthodox only. Most Tibetans believe in Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism, a combination of Buddhism and native non-Buddhist beliefs. On the other hand, ten ethnic groups are followers of Islam: Bonan, Dongxiang, Hui, Kazak, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Tatar, Uygur, and Uzbek. And many from Daur, Ewenki, Hezhen, Manchu, Oroqen, Tu, and Xibe are devoted to Shamanism, an ancient practice where a shaman (one that knows) acts as an intermediary between the natural and the spiritual worlds.

Nearly half of the fifty-five ethnic minority groups adhere to the religious traditions of their ancestors that see a spirit behind everything in nature. The Jino people are worshipers of the sun. A Jino woman can be easily identified by the symbol of a shining sun sewed on the back of her top. They also worship ancestry, as Han and some other ethnic minorities do. The Naxi people not only believe in Lamaism and Daoism, but also hang on to their native creed known as *Dongbajiao* (Religion of Eastern Ba). Polytheistic and naturalistic in nature, it borrows from Lamaism.

In the 19th century, Christianity and Catholicism came to China. They gained ground not only among Han Chinese but also among ethnic minority peoples. France alone established seven parishes with a thousand cathedrals in Inner Mongolia (Qiantuwang, 2006). Believers of Catholicism or Christianity can be found among a dozen ethnic groups.

The Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) affected religious lives of Chinese at large. Many ethnic minority groups were forced to give up their traditional beliefs. However, "In the post-Mao era, China's society and religion are both becoming increasingly pluralistic. State policies toward religion are also evolving" (Lai, 2006). Since the 1980s, \$4,500,000 has been spent on renovating the famed Potala Palace in Tibet. Recent statistics from China's Bureau of Religious Affairs shows that in 2006, the country had over 1,500 Taoist temples, 16,000 Catholic and Christian churches, and 17,600 Buddhist temples, in addition to 1,700 public places for believers of Lamaism. Chinese Muslims, who pray outside their homes, see the number of mosques multiply quickly. Mecca welcomes more and more Chinese Muslim pilgrims each year.

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Customs

Like all civilizations, the fifty-five Chinese ethnic minority groups each have their unique customs, rituals and taboos. Discussion of them in detail would require a full-length book. Here is a sampling of customs and taboos of a few ethnicities.

Tibetans and Mongolians gift their guests with *kha-btags* (ritual scarves). Made with materials of different qualities, the scarves are of different colors and lengths. The longer it is, the more significant it becomes. Silk *kha-btags* are the most valuable and predominantly white in color. Tibetans believe white symbolizes purity, honesty, and kindheartedness. Colored *kha-btags* are usually dedicated to Buddhist deities.

Kha-btag-gifting can be very ceremonious. How a *kha-btag* is presented depends on the seniority of the recipient. When giving a *kha-btag* to an elder or a superior, you must bring your upper body a little forward while holding the *kha-btag* with both hands above your head. When giving it to your peers, you need only to hang it over the hands or wrists of the recipient who hold them out. If the recipient is a junior or subordinate, you just place the *kha-btag* over his or her neck.

A *kha-btag* conveys different feelings when used in different situations. It can be a gesture of New Year greetings, a sign of welcome to visitors, a symbol of good wishes to newlyweds, or a message of mourning to the dead and of solace to the living.

Mongols are as hospitable as any other Chinese ethnic minorities. The first thing they do when they have visitors to their yurt is offer them *naicha* (milk tea) or other beverages. Drinking *naicha* is very ceremonial. Holding it with your left hand, you dip in the cup with the index finger of your right hand three times and snap away the moisture on your finger. The first time, you flick it forward above your head to consecrate the heaven. Next you toss it onto the floor to sanctify the earth. Finally you apply it onto your forehead to bless the ancestor. Only then can you start drinking from the cup. If you don't feel like drinking, you may politely put the cup away intact.

The Uygurs are a hospitable people, too, unless you disregard their customs and social taboos. They believe one's gaze possesses an evil power that can bring ill fortune to them. That's why they hate to see people stare at them and the things they possess. Visitors and tourists must be careful when shopping; for paying too much attention for too long to a piece of merchandise without buying it may invite resentment from a Uygur shopkeeper.

Other ethnic peoples have their peculiar taboos, too. As a rule of thumb, it is advisable to stay away from religious ceremonies and funeral services of an ethnic minority community. These occasions are considered sacred or private. Some ethnic people also hate to see their hearths violated. A visitor shouldn't touch the tripod above the fire, nor should he or she step on the fire itself. Doing so would, as they believe, bring bad luck to their households.

Eating dogs, disgusting as it is to many Westerners, is customary in some areas of Asia. However, many Chinese ethnic minorities treat dog-eating as a taboo. They include Miao, Manchu, Mongol, Yao, Tibet, Yi, and the ten Muslim ethnic groups. Muslims in China, like elsewhere in the world, also prohibit the consumption of pork and alcohol.

When it comes to marriage, each ethnic group has a particular tradition. A wedding of ethnic Bai takes three days to complete. "Four," which means "safe and sound" to the Bais, is a

favorite number used to arrange dinner tables. Each has food served in a set of four containers and vessels.

A Yao wedding has a strange phenomenon. While the bridegroom dances and sings with relatives and friends around a bonfire outside, he leaves his bride alone in the bride chamber. The Mosuos, a branch of the Naxi ethnic group, still practice *zouhun* (walking marriage). Men visit their spouses during the night and return to their parents' homes when day breaks. Fatherless children are raised by their mothers' family members. The Hanis have turned the tradition of *qianghun* (bride kidnapping) to the bride's benefit. The bride's parents "refuse" to marry their daughter so as to "force" the bridegroom to kidnap her. By doing so, they hope the bridegroom will value their daughter more and treat her better after marrying her. A bride of the Zhuang, Yi, Tibet, and Gaoshan ethnic groups is expected to "cry" instead of rejoicing on setting out for her bridegrooms' homes. By "crying," she demonstrates her unwillingness to leave her parents, who have invested so much in her upbringing. This practice is known as *kuhun* (crying marriage).

A man of Dai is married into his woman's family. Before living with his wife, he has to perform hard labor for three years. If he fails the test, he will be booted out, and the bond is automatically dissolved. If he succeeds, however, his fate will change completely. He will become the housekeeper, leaving the outdoor labor to his wife for the rest of their lives.

Most Chinese today either bury or cremate their dead. Some of the Tibetans, Yugurs, and Monbas still expose bodies to birds of prey, a custom known as *tianzang* (celestial burial). However, burials in water (*shuizang*), on trees (*shuzang*), or on cliffs (*yazang*), once practices of some ethnic minority groups, have now become history.

Mourning behaviors also vary from ethnicity to ethnicity. In the Dai tradition, after one passes away, his or her family members will put up a *fan* (long narrow banner) in their community's Buddhist temple. The *fan* is believed to be a ladder leading the soul of the dead to heaven. Once there, it needs no attention from the living. That means it requires no annual visitation as the Han and most other ethnic Chinese do.

For all their different traditions, one thing in common about the Chinese ethnic minorities is their respect for the elderly. The Jingpos hold a *jinglaohui* (party of respecting the old) each year when the young vie with one another to invite the elderly to dine. The Hanis have a *jinglaojie* (festival of respecting the old). Young Hanis plant trees as a wish that the elders' lives be as evergreen. Ethnic minorities like Dong, Korean and Bai observe similar rites.

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Festivals

While enjoying official holidays with the rest of the country, China's ethnic minorities have their own festivals to celebrate. Governments of ethnic regions can decide on paid leaves for ethnic holidays and festivals.

As a result of cultural interaction, thirty-three of the fifty-five officially recognized minority ethnic groups celebrate Chinese New Year, though each in their own ways. Other minority ethnic groups enjoy their unique traditions of festivity exclusively, such as the Koreans' *shutoujie* (Hair-combing Festival), the Dongs' *guniangjie* (Festival of Girls) and the Jingpos' *munao zongge* (Singing and Dancing Festival).

Because of media exposure and tourism expansion, some of the unique ethnic festivals have become nationally known. They include the Tibetan's *Shoton*, the Yi's Torch Festival, Mongol's *Nadam*, and the Dai's Water-splashing Festival, to list a few. Tourists don't have to miss some of them if they come at the wrong time of the year: The Water-splashing Festival of the Dais is reenacted daily to entertain visitors to the Dai community near Jinghong, capital of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan. They don't have to worry even if they are in the wrong place; for the Yi's Torch Festival can be experienced in the Ethnic Park in Kunming.

As you already know, a Chinese ethnic minority may have a number of branches that live apart from one another. Each follows a different tradition and has its own celebrations. On the other hand, because of their common cultural background, several ethnic minorities observe the same holidays. The ten Muslim ethnic groups share Corban, Rozi Heyt and *Shengjijie* (Festival of Commemorating Muhammad).

However, ethnic groups of distinct cultural backgrounds may also celebrate similar festivals, though details of the celebrations differ from one ethnicity to another. Torch festivals are popular with not only ethnic Yi, but also with Bai, Hani, Lahu, Naxi, and Pumi. The custom of water splashing is shared among Achang, Blang, De'ang, Va as well as Dai. *Sanyuesan* (Third Day of the Third Moon Festival) is celebrated concurrently by peoples of Bai, Li, Buyei and Miao.

Many of the ethnic festivals have originated from their daily lives. They celebrate their labor, the animals that help them with their labor, and the crops that result from their labor. The Dais, Dongs, Hanis, Pumis and Shes celebrate *xinmijie* (New Rice Festival) or *changxinjie* (New Grain-tasting Festival) at the first harvest of rice, a time close to the autumnal equinox. The *changxinjie* of the ethnic She features ancestor worship, dancing, and *pange* (singing contest between men and women that can last several days). Traditional food includes *ciba* (cakes made of glutinous rice), a recipe of which is available in this book. Ethnic minorities like Blang and Qiang treat their farm cattle with such respect that they celebrate them in the form of *xiniujiangjie* (Festival of Washing Cattle's Hooves) and *niuwanghui* (Fair of Cattle King). Others that share the same tradition include Li, Mulao, and She.

Some festival activities reveal ethnic minorities' lifestyles of the past and the present. Horse racing is a favorite of many ethnic minorities. Sui does it at *duanjie* (The Year End Festival). Tu does it at *leitaihui* (Singing Contest). Mongol does it in *Nadam* (Recreation Gathering). Pumi does it on *danianjie* (Grand New Year Day). The most exciting of all is *diaoyang*. Part of the Muslim's Corban celebration, the race involves catching a lamb's body as a trophy.

Like those of the Han Chinese, many holidays and festivals of ethnic minorities are also

associated with tales or legends. Take the Water-splashing Festival for example. One story tells of a monstrous father and his seven daughters. The monster treated the Dai people so badly that his daughters decided to get rid of him. They managed to learn that he could only be killed by his own hair. While he was fast asleep, they plucked a tress of his hair, made it into a bow, and placed it against his neck. It cut his head off immediately. Before they had time to rejoice, the girls were alarmed to find the head reeling on the floor as it spewed fire and scorched everything in its way. To prevent the fire from spreading to the Dai community, one of the girls picked up the burning head and it immediately cooled off. But it smeared her beautiful dress. Her sisters splashed water onto her to clean the contamination off. Hence began the tradition of water-splashing in April, the beginning of the Dai's New Year.

Another version of the story has to do with a Dai prince who slaughtered a ravaging fire dragon of nine heads. When his people found him badly burned, they saved his life by pouring a great amount of water to clean his wound and soothe his pain.

Twenty of China's ethnic minorities have their own calendars. Some also have Zodiac animals like the Han Chinese. Ethnic Yi begin the Zodiac, however, with their totem tiger instead of the rat. The Tibetan New Year starts from the first day of the first Tibetan month, which is neither the Chinese nor the Western's New Year's Day.

Ethnic festivals number in the hundreds. Tibetans alone enjoy over 150. The multitude of ethnic holidays and festivals add to the diversity and richness of the Chinese culture at large.

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Performing Arts, Cinema, and Television

More than 20,000 musical pieces, 7,000 dramas, 2,000 play scripts, and 200 musical instruments have been collected in the past few decades in Yunnan Province alone (Minzu wang, 2006). Natural singers, Chinese ethnic minorities have a rich tradition of performing arts.

Music

Duige are songs in antiphonal style sung by men and women either one-to-one or group-to-group. They are specific to many of the Chinese ethnic minorities. Notable are Bai, Dong, Hani, Li, Miao, Mulao, She, Yi, and Zhuang. They sing *duige* for fun, for purposes of allaying fatigue during labor, or for youngsters to find potential spouses. Contests of *duige* are also held to add to the excitement of festival celebrations. One such event can be found in the story "Liu Sanjie—a Fearless Folk Song Singer" retold in this book.

Baisha xiyue, a pride of the Naxi people, dates back to the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368). It had been in oblivion until its rediscovery in the early 1950s. A classical orchestral music, it has twenty-four *qupai* (tunes) played with ancient ethnic musical instruments.

Dage (The Great Song) of ethnic Dong is an unaccompanied traditional folk chorus. It has become world-famous for its contrapuntal melody, which is amazingly attuned with the theory and technique of Western music.

Apart from the chanting used by Lamas to help recite Buddhist scriptures, animated secular forms of music are also prevalent in Tibet. Much of the Uygur, Uzbek, and Tajik music is based on the Twelve Muqam scales. The Hanis are known for their musical form of *haba*; the Tujias for *longchuandiao*; the Salars for *salarqu*; the Yaos for *anchunge*, and the Huis for *huar'er*.

Famed professional ethnic singers include Hu Songhua of Manchu; Song Zuying of Miao; Qubi'awu of Yi; Kelimu of Uygur; Tengger'er of Mongol; Caidan Zhuoma of Tibet.

There are roughly four families of ethnic musical instruments:

- *jizou* (percussion);
- *chuijou* (wind);
- *lazou* (bow-string);
- *tanzou* (pluck-string).

The Korean *changgu* (long drum), the Tibetan *shengu* (spiritual drum), and the Uygur's and Uzbek's *sabayi* (a combination of clubs and iron rings) are some of the percussion instruments. Gin's *danxian* (unicord) and Yi's *sanxian* (tricorn) are examples of the numerous pluck-string instruments. The twenty or so bow-string instruments include the famous Mongolian *matouqin* (horse-headed fiddle). A tale of its origin is retold in this book. *Hulusi* (a bottle gourd with pipes of different lengths), one of many ethnic wind instruments, is a favorite of Dai, Achang, Va, De'ang, and Blang alike. It's gaining popularity among the Han Chinese as well.

Dance

Chinese ethnic minorities are talented for dancing. The twenty-six larger ethnic minority groups in Yunnan alone have 1,095 kinds of dances with a total of 6,718 choreographic movements (Ma, 2004). Even one of the smallest ethnic minority group Oroqen boasts a long list of dances, of which *yihenaren* is a ritual dance for the occasion of passing on genealogical records. Tibetans are noted for their *guozhuang* dance. Young men and women move rhythmically from right to left in a big circle, dancing while singing. Ethnic groups like Uygur,

Korean, and Mongolian, to list a few, are also known as gifted dancers.

Different dances are for different occasions. The Jingpo people dance *munao zongge* and *dingge* to celebrate or rejoice, and dance *gebenge* and *jinzhaizai* to mourn or worship. One branch of Yi identified by their beautiful embroidered waistband like to dance around a bonfire—an event where a young man and a woman court each other. The Naxi people dance their *halili* and *dongba* to celebrate their ethnic festivals.

Dao Meilan of the Dai ethnicity is famed for her "Princess Peacock Dance;" Ayi Tula of Uygur, known for her "Picking Grapes Dance;" Cui Meishan of Korean, noted for her "Long Drum Dance;" Muode Gema, of Mongol, famous for her "Cup and Bowl Dance;" and Yang Liping of Bai, celebrated for her "Lark's Soul," "Two Trees," and "Drizzle."

Drama

Theatrical arts of ethnic minorities are as diversified and colorful. *Zangju* (Tibetan drama) is known in Tibet as *lhamo*, which means "fairies." It was believed the drama was first started by seven *lhamoes*. Unlike conventional dramas known to the average Chinese, different parts of *Zangju* are distinguished by their masks instead of their costumes. Human voices in place of a band are employed to accompany the performance. A show consists of three sections, beginning with a dance to pay tribute to Buddhist gods and closing with a ritual of good wishes. The bulk of the show in between consists of dancing, singing, and lyric reciting in plain and rhymed languages. A full-length *Zangju* can last from one to five days.

Dongxi (Dong Opera) evolved from the Yi's tradition of storytelling and ballad singing. It drew a lot on Han operas. *Baiju* (Bai Opera) uses both the Bai dialect and Mandarin. There are as many as thirty variant tune types to represent parts of different ages, genders, and emotions. Only a high-pitched *suona* (Chinese horn) and some instruments of percussion are used during long interludes between singings. The topics of *Baiju* are both indigenous stories and the classics of the Han Chinese (Yang, 2000). "A Cloud of Love from a Princess" is a much loved *Baiju*. Its story will be retold in this book.

Artists of Hui and Manchu like Cheng Yanqiu and Ma Lianliang have made immeasurable contribution to the national theatrical art called *Jingju* (Beijing Opera). The brilliance of their stardom have masked their ethnic identities; most their fans don't even know their ethnic backgrounds.

Cinema

Movies relating to ethnic minorities fall into two categories: those of ethnic topics and those by ethnic producers. *Yaoshan yanshi* (*Romance of the Yao Mountains*), released in 1933, was the first movie China had ever made about its ethnic minorities.

Love is an eternal theme of artistic creation. Outstanding were *Lusheng liange* (*Love Song to the Tune of Lusheng*) about the Lahu people, *Wu duo jinhua* (*Five Golden Flowers*) about the Bai, and *Bingshan shang de lai ke* (*Guests from the Icy Mountains*), about Uygur and Tajik. Most of them starred actors and actresses from ethnic minorities.

Artists of ethnic minorities have worked hard to succeed in the Han-dominated movie industry. *Tulufan qingge* (*Love Songs of Turpan*) is one of the most recent examples. Its directors Jinlini and Xie'er Zhati are both from ethnic Uygur.

Television

Though television coverage has exceeded 90 percent even in the Tibet and Xinjiang

Autonomous Regions today, TV programs made by the ethnic peoples are still meager (Xu 2005). To encourage the production of more and better programs featuring ethnic peoples, China set up the biannual *Junma* (Fine Horse) Award in 1986. By 2002, a total of 459 programs made by TV stations in regions of ethnic minorities had received this award. *Xinjiang guniang* (*A Girl from Xinjiang*) is one of the few TV plays directed and starred exclusively by Uygurs, its director being Zouliya Sima Aiyinuowa.

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Fine Arts

Chinese ethnic minorities began art creation in prehistoric times. They first painted on rock faces. Cliff paintings can be found on the Tianshan Mountains in Xinjiang, the Heishan Mountains in Gansu, and the Yinshan Mountains in Inner Mongolia. They are also part of the scenery along the Zuojiang and Heilongjiang Rivers.

Among the artistic relics of the early ethnic minorities in Yunnan, the *Nanzhao zhongxing huajuan* (A Painting Scroll of the Zhongxing Period of the Nanzhao Reign) and the *Zhang Shengwen huajuan* (A Painting Scroll by Zhang Shengwen) are the most distinguished. They were created by the Bai and Yi artists around the 10th century.

A century later, Hu Huan emerged as a great painter of horses and hunting scenes. He was from Qidan, a descendant of the ancient Xianpi ethnicity. His *Zhuoxietu* (A Scene of Repose during a Hunting Trip) keeps alive a moment when a great number of Qidan hunters were about to enjoy their long-awaited break after a hunting trip. Hu's contemporary Yelüpei, a Qidan prince who later adopted the Han Chinese name Li Zanhua, was equally good at depicting horses and horsemen.

Fine arts of Chinese ethnic minorities are as historical as they are diversified. Naxi's *Shenlutu* (Painting of the Sacred Path) is one of the many genres of *Dongba* paintings. On a cloth canvas of 15 meters (49.21 feet) long, it has several hundred images of beings from heaven, earth, and the underworld. As its name suggests, the painting was designed to lead one's soul out of hellish sufferings to heaven. Naxi artists of the older generation have been imitating the time-honored *Dongba* paintings while young artists today are more innovative.

One can't mention Tibet without talking about *thangkas* or *tankas*. They are painted scrolls or embroidered banners used primarily for religious purposes. Borrowing from traditional techniques from the Han Chinese, Hindus, and Nepalese, *thangkas* are painted with precision and rich colors. Extracted from natural pigments, the red, yellow, blue, and white colors are symbolic of authority, virtue, solemnity, and purity respectively. *Thangkas* come in different sizes embroidered, woven, appliquéd, painted, or beaded. Themes of *thangkas* include religion, biography, history, folkway, and even medicine (Tibetan 2006).

Tibetans are also adept at creating murals, which can be found in every monastery as they illustrate Buddha and his followers. Some murals also record historical events, such as the marriage of Songtsan Gambo and Princess Wencheng, a tale retold in this book.

Most fascinating is sand painting, done by Tibetans of the Tantric Buddhist sect. Buddhists of this faction believe in a harmony of opposites. While meditating, they use sands of brilliant colors to create symmetrical diagrams of Mandala, which is a plan of the spiritual world of fulfillment. Before long, the Buddhist artists scrape the sand and cast it into flowing water. They do so because they believe nothing is permanent.

Some ethnic minority groups are especially good at carving. The Buyei people are known for carving wooden masks used in their opera known as *nuoxi*. Their woodcarving talent can be found in their architecture and furniture. They are also skilled in carving ink slabs with folklore motifs. Their Longxi brand enjoys national reputation.

The Oroqens use birch barks to carve. Famed is their *adawale*, a tub-like container for

stowing away one's jewelries and new clothes. It's so treasured by the Oroqens that a bride will bring it along with her as part of her dowry.

Calligraphy is the specialty of the Manchus. They took pride in Weng Fanggang (1733-1818), Liu Yong (1719-1804), Yong Rong (1752—1823), and Tie Bao (1752-1824), known as the Four Great Master Calligraphers in Chinese history. Aisin Gioro Pujie and Qi Gong are among celebrated contemporary calligraphers.

There were many Mongolian painters during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). They had learned the craft from the Han Chinese and perfected it afterwards. They included Li Huosun, Yu Chuhan, and Boyan Shouren. Chaoke Batu and Esu Ritai are two of the most accomplished Mongolian oil painters today.

In September 2005, an art show named *Minzu tuanjie song (Song of Ethnic Unity)* was held in Beijing. It featured eighty-two visual artists from all ethnicities of China. Highlighting the artists were Li Youxiang from the Derung ethnicity, Zhao Xian from Xibe, Zhaxi Yingqian from Monba, Maji Ritai from Tu, Lan Faqin from She, and Nie Zhongbang from Tujia. Efforts such as this to preserve and promote ethnic traditions of artistic creation will surely offset the challenges coming from both foreign and Han Chinese cultural infiltration.

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Literature

Literature of ethnic minorities is an inseparable part of the Chinese literature at large. Many ethnic minorities share Märchen, epics, and ballads. Some claim literary forms peculiar to themselves. Nu and She are especially good at *xushige* (epic songs). Xibe is talented for *nianshuo* (reading and telling) Tu is gifted for fables. And Uygur, Uzbek and Tartar are known for humorous tales.

Ethnic literature has a long history, tracing to the Han Chinese classic *Shijing* (The Book of Songs) compiled between the 11th and the 6th century B.C. Even today, a recital of *Shijing* lyrics is still part of a wedding in the Tujia community in Hunan Province.

The epic, rare in the Han Chinese literature, is a literary tradition of almost all ethnic minorities. The theme of love pervades the epic, as in the Dai tale “Princess Peacock” retold in this book. Some epics are historic. Most noted are *Gesa'erwang zhuan* (Legend of King Gesaer) of the Tibetans, *Jiangge'er* (*The World Conqueror*) of the Mongols, and *Manasi* (*Hero Manasi*) of the Kirgiz. They are all works of great length. *Gesa'erwang zhuan*, for example, has over a million lines of verses in 120 episodes.

Chinese efforts to document and preserve ethnic epics started in the 1930s. The first publication was the Yi epic *Axi de xianji* (*Ancestors of the Axi People*) in 1945. Since the 1950s, dozens of genesis epics from ethnic minorities of Southwest China have been published. They included the Naxi's *Chuangshiji* (*The Genesis*) and the Yao's *Miluotuo*. Both are retold in the book.

Although oral tradition dominates ethnic literature, writings in ethnic languages have never been in short supply. Bai writers began to pen their poems and lyrics as early as the 3rd century B.C. Tajik's educated elite started to write two centuries later. Intellectuals of Tibet and Zhuang became creative from the 7th century. So did Dai and Tujia afterwards. The twenty-six major ethnic minorities in Yunnan have authored more than 100,000 volumes of literary classics in twenty-three different scripts. Of the 50,000 volumes of ancient literature discovered in Dunhuang, an ancient city on the Silk Road, more than 10 percent were written in various ethnic languages. Among the collection, a Tibetan text titled *Tsambo zhuanlüe* (*A Brief Biography of Tsambo*) is of great literary grace.

Turki works of significance appeared in the 10th century. *Aiqing changshi* (*An Epic of Love*) by Nizhali, a Uygur poet of the 1900s, has had far-reaching impact on literary creation in West and Central Asia. The most distinguished Mongolian *Menggu mishi* (Mongolia's Secret History) came out in the 1440's.

While ethnic languages have been used primarily to write about ethnic topics, ethnic minorities also borrow from Chinese stories. The Chinese classics *Sanguo yanyi* (*Romance of Three Kingdoms*) and *Xixiangji* (*Record of the West Chamber*) were retold in the Daur language long ago. *Dongyong yu Liu guniang* (*Dongyong and Sister Liu*) is a Gin version of the ethnic Han Chinese “Cowherd and Weaving Girl,” a story retold in *The Magic Lotus Lantern and Other Tales from the Han Chinese* (Yuan, 2006).

Some ethnic authors wrote about Chinese in Chinese. Topping the list is the renowned Manchu author Pu Songling (1640 – 1715), who compiled and retold hundreds of tales of supernatural beings in his *Liaozhai zhiyi* (*Strange Stories from a Make-do Studio*). Others include Lao She (1899 – 1966) and Duanmu Hongliang (1912 – 1996), both from the Manchu ethnicity. Lao She was famed for his novel *Si shi tong tang* (*Four Generations under One Roof*); and

Duanmu Hongliang, for his *Ke'erqin caoyuan (The Khorchin Grasslands)*. Shen Congwen (1902 – 1988) of the Miao ethnicity was known for his full-length novel as well as his short stories.

Today, while collecting and compiling volume after volume of ethnic classics, ethnic writers are writing conscientiously about the ethnic themes they know best in both native dialects and Chinese. A group of Nu writers have produced over a hundred full-length and short novels. Outstanding are *Yabiluo xueshan (The Yabiluo Snow Mountain)* in the Lisu vernacular and *Nujiang taosheng (The Roar of the Nu River)* in Chinese (Gao 2005). Ethnic subject matters have become an inexhaustible source that writers of all ethnic backgrounds in China are trying to tap in their literary creation.

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Storytelling

Chinese ethnic minorities tell stories to enforce and perpetuate their unique cultures. Indeed, lacking writing systems, oral traditions serve as the collective memory of many ethnic minorities. Faced with modernization and commercialization, holding on to a tradition becomes all the more difficult. Consequently, many ethnic forms of storytelling are at risks.

Unlike the Han Chinese, ethnic minorities treat storytelling as less of a profession than a communal activity. Storytelling is performed more often at festival gatherings than on a stage. A typical scenario involves a knowledgeable elder with good memory and humor telling stories to youngsters gathering around him or her. Most of the ethnic minorities tell their stories in their own languages. Some like Manchu, Bai, and Mongolians are bilingual or multi-lingual.

In most cases, storytelling takes the form of talking and singing, sometimes to the accompaniment of certain musical instruments. It's similar to the Han Chinese *shuochang*, a generic term for storytelling under the category of *quyi*, which Mark Bender calls “performing narrative arts” (Bender 2003). There are more than eighty types of ethnic *shuochang*. That accounts for one fifth of the 400 *quyi* forms still existent in China.

Many of the best-known performers of *xiangsheng* (comic monologues and dialogues) are from the Hui and Manchu nationalities. Some of the most renowned have been Bai Quanfu, Chang Baosen, Guo Qiru, Hou Baolin, Ma Sanli, Su Wenmao, Wang Fengshan, and Zhao Zhenduo. In the mid 1990s, a young Tibetan *xiangsheng* performer by the name of Luosang thrilled and soon saddened the nation. He was capable of playing a band with nothing but his mouth. In 1995, his 27-year old life was cut short by a car accident.

Some ethnic minorities create their versions of *xiangsheng* by drawing on ideas and even stories from the Han Chinese. The Tibetan *dangling* is for one of them. Some simply perform Han Chinese *xiangsheng* in their ethnic vernaculars, as the Uygur storyteller Abuliz Tuopingti does. Others invent something similar to *xiangsheng*, such as *mantan* (comic monologue), *caitan* (comic dialogue) and *sanlaoren* (“three old men”) of the Koreans. The Mongolian *xiaokeyare* is another example. It consists of talking, ventriloquism, and singing.

Ethnic minorities’ storytelling involves a lot of singing, as in the case of the Tibetan *zhongxie*. They do, however, have the conventional form of storytelling known to the Han Chinese as *pingshu* (storytelling with commentary). Mongol’s *wulige'er*, Xibe’s *nianshuo*, and Uygur’s *wayizileke* are some of the ethnic *pingshu*.

Tanchang, singing a story to the accompaniment of a plucking instrument, is found in the Uygur’s *dasitan*, the Tibetan’s *maqu*, the Bai’s *dabenqu*, the Zhuang’s *molun*, and the Mongol’s *haolaibao*.

The 800-year old *dabenqu* of ethnic Bai is based on their folk songs. It’s performed by a duo: One sings and the other plays a trichord. There are two styles of *dabenge*, the northern and the southern; the former being mild and agreeable and the latter simple and unadorned. *Molun* is popular among ethnic Zhuang. It was originally performed by a single person, who sang in the Zhuang vernacular while playing a smaller tricord. Beginning in the early 1950s, it has taken in more performers and accompanying instruments like *maguhu* (horse-bone fiddle) and *huluhu* (calabash fiddle).

Haolaibao, which means “singing after singing” in Mongolian, falls into the following subsets:

- *danghai haolaibao*, performed by varied numbers of people on broad topics;

- *wulegeri haolaibao*, performed with questions and answers;
- *dairilacha haolaibao*, sung in an antiphonal style with a satirical tone;
- *huerren haolaibao*, performed solo with a fiddle.

Some ethnic *shuochang* don't require any musical instrument, as in the case of the Oroqen *yimakan*. Since the Oroqens don't have a writing system, they've kept *yimakan* alive by oral tradition. A solo performer sings and narrates alternately in the voices of a child, a man, a woman, or an elder, as the plot of a story calls for (Xu, 2000).

Other ethnic storytellers use unconventional musical instruments. A good example is the 500-year old *linggu* (storytelling with bells and drums) of the Yao people. Performers beat their long drums with bells tied to their wrists or fingers while they sing and narrate in the Yao vernacular.

Ethnic minorities are never short of stories to tell. A survey conducted in the early 1990s revealed that the ethnic Hui alone had possessed over 1,200 tales. Most of the stories that the ethnic minorities tell are about their cultural heroes, their love affairs, or people and things with which they identify themselves. Tibetans sing and talk about King Gesa'er; Mongolians, about Jiangge'er, Gada Meilin and Princess Yandan; Kirgizes, about Manas; Manchus, about Nisang Saman; Ewenkis, about A'ertai Congbao'erfu; Daurs, about Shaolang and Daifu; Kazaks, about A'erpamisi; Uygurs, about Ailipu and Sainaimu; Bais, about King Bai; Suis, about *Dragon's Daughter and a Fisherman*; and Dongs, about King Wumian.

Today, the tradition of storytelling among ethnic peoples faces more challenges than that of the Han Chinese. For, in addition to the competition of high-tech mass media, most of the ethnic storytellers use their own tongues that have limited audiences. The greatest danger lies in the fact that many of their stories of great length take dedicated and talented people to preserve their long stories. Fewer young ethnic minorities seem to be interested. Instead, they are drawn to the more exotic and exciting pop culture raging elsewhere.

Additional Reading

- Chao, Gejin. *Qian nian jue chang ying xiong ge : Weilate Menggu shi shi chuan tong tian ye san ji (The Heroic Songs of The Past : Fieldnotes on the Oirat Mongolian Epic Tradition)*, Nanning Shi: Guangxi ren min chu ban she, 2004. 135pp. ISBN: 7219047185.
- Spagnoli, Cathy. *Asian Tales and Tellers*. Little Rock, Ar: August House Publishers, 1998. 224pp. ISBN-10: 0874835267; ISBN-13: 978-0874835267.