

East Asia

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With the end of the reign of the Manchus who governed the Chinese Empire for three centuries, and with the advent of the Republic (1911), the minority issue took on a dimension impossible to imagine in 19th-century China. Aware of the fragility of national cohesion in this immense land of heterogeneous population groups, Sun Yatsen, founder of the Republic, still minimized the influence of minorities, affirming the supremacy of the Han, the majority ethnic group and founders of one of the first Chinese dynasties. The question of numbers quickly became a focus of debate. Proclaiming that, of a population total of 400 million inhabitants at the time, the minorities represented only slightly more than 10 million, Sun Yatsen implicitly called upon them to disappear into the Chinese melting pot. The statistics published at the time, however, contradicted the President's assertions by listing 26 million non-Han Chinese.

In China, the 55 national minorities (*minzu*) recognized (nearly 120 million persons today, 10% of the total population) are identified on the basis of ethnic, cultural, and – paradoxical for a country led by an officially atheist party – religious criteria. Ten of the 55 minorities are adepts of Islam, the most important of which together constitute a total of 18 million persons: Hui (approximately 9 million), Uygurs (7.5), Kazakhs (1.2) and Kirghizes (0.2).

The 'cooked' and the 'raw'

The Hui, descendants of Arab and Persian merchants that had settled by the thousands in China beginning in the 7th century, and the Muslims of Central and Western Asia brought by the Mongolian army in the 13th century, belong to the category referred to as the 'cooked' (*shou*, cooked by the civilization, submissive, acculturated). By marriage with Han women, the Hui were able to assure their reproduction, but this exogamy led to their rapid sinization: they would no longer be distinguishable from the Han (customs, traditions, physical appearance) apart from their religion, Islam, and the constraints which it imposes (dietary prohibitions, particularly severe in the rejection of pork, the most appreciated meat of the Han).

Uygurs, Kazakhs and Kirghizes belong to the category of the 'raw' (*sheng*, unrefined, independent, having kept their original culture). Their largest majority being concentrated in Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan), this category forms the most visible Islamic community in China. Cousins of the Turkic speaking Muslims of the ex-Soviet Republic borders, they speak Turkic languages and consider Chinese a foreign language; they have rich cultural traditions, common to those of Central Asian Muslims, and have nothing in common with the Han. Their only connection was made under constraint, after the capture and annexation of Xinjiang by the Qing in the 18th century.

The communist regime in 1949 broke off, at least in its discourse, from the homogenizing views of the nationalists by insisting, contrary the latter, on the multinational character of China. However, according to the facts, it was under this regime that the policy of sinization by population transfer began to veritably boom. Thus, between the censuses of 1953 and 1964, the number of Han in Inner Mongolia had doubled, passing from 5.1 to 10.7 million. In Xinjiang, the number had multiplied by seven (from 330 thousand to 2.3 million), and further doubled between 1964 and 1982. More so than its discourse, these colossal population displacements of Han in the border zones translate, at best, the strategic fears, and at worst, the hegemonic views of the central

Fertility and Identity: Muslims in Xinjiang

power. Migration alone, however, does not suffice.

Indeed, parallel to this population policy with its assimilationist aims – yet in order to avoid aggravating the political and strategic contention – China conceded substantial privileges to the frontier minorities in demographic terms. This was done, however, at the risk of seeing, in the end, the effects of divergent demographic growths jeopardize Han supremacy in these regions.

Is religion influencing fertility?

In a national context of strict limitation of births, China allows its minorities a much greater demographic growth than that of the Han. Accordingly, in the latest population census of 1990, Uygur women, Kazakhs and Kirghizes, had an average of two times more children than Han women and 1.5 times more than Hui women, the latter nonetheless being Muslim. These minorities of Xinjiang have thus not obeyed the general rule: while there was a rapid decline in fertility rates for the Han (the average number of children per woman dropped from 5.2 in 1970 to 2.6 in 1990) and for the Hui (5.5 in 1970, 3.1 in 1990), they continued to bring a higher number of children into the world, 6 in 1970, and still 4.6 in 1990 (Figure 1).

The behaviours of the Hui, Chinese Muslims, have evolved parallel to those of the Han, with hardly one child more on average. Remaining completely disconnected with the Muslim minorities of Xinjiang, the Hui, a group that is geographically diffused and mixed with the Han population, have adopted as it were the reproductive norms of their surroundings. The cultural factor has clearly held pre-eminence over the religious factor: the Hui, by their fertility, are much closer to the Han than to their Turkic speaking co-religionists.

The phase difference of the Uygurs, Kazakhs and Kirghizes in relation to the Han, and all the more so in relation to the Hui, was substantial: throughout the 1980s, the women of these minorities gave birth to at least two more children each than the Han or Hui women. Was this demography, significantly disconnected from the rest of the na-

tion, to be the precursor of the vague attempts at autonomy or independence that were to become exacerbated especially in the decade that followed?

The Chinese birth control policy, more tolerant towards its minorities than towards the Han, played an incontestable role in widening the gaps in fertility. But that is not the only reason. Although many Sunni Muslims are critical towards birth control, the high fertility rates of the people of Xinjiang are not imputable to a religious factor alone: we have seen that Islam did not by any means impede the fertile transition of the Hui, themselves Sunni Muslims. However, the high fertility of the Turkic speaking populations, which naturally translates into a more abundant population, seems to reinforce the centripetal inclination. It is indeed disconcerting that their fertility is far superior to that of their cousins in the ex-Soviet republics (Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, etc.) and is even greater than any other Turkic speaking area in the world, where fertility has fallen to a level below those of developing countries.

The example of the Hui demonstrates very well that the *stricto sensu* religious factor actually has little influence on the process of transition in fertility rates. Furthermore, it leads one to conclude that the atypical behaviours of the Xinjiang Muslims entail another dimension, which could well be political.

High fertility to affirm identity?

Following the example of other minority groups aspiring, if not to autonomy, than at least to obtaining greater recognition, the Turkic speaking Muslims of Xinjiang seem to have found, in this high fertility, a means to affirm their ethnic identity and to reinforce their resistance to the Han. The Hui, who are spread across the territory in a rather homogenous fashion, who are today strongly sinized and have never had their own territory, greatly differ from the Uygurs, Kazakhs and Kirghizes, who have cultivated a strong sense of identity – bound to their geographic concentration in their own terri-

tories where they hold the majority – which has given rise to ethnic, cultural, and even separatist claims.

Xinjiang ('new frontier') has only been part of China since 1759, when it was conquered by the Manchu dynasty. From then until 1949, only ten generations went by, which is relatively short when considered in the light of the collective memory of a people, and their sinization is but superficial. Moreover, contrary to the Hui, these Turkic speaking peoples had their sights set on places of 'high civilization': those being Istanbul, Samarkand or Boukhara, rather than Peking. During this period, the links with the central powers remained very loose, to such an extent that on several occasions Xinjiang found itself in a situation of quasi independence. Since 1949, Xinjiang has been increasingly firmly tied with China and is the target of massive colonization: from 7% in 1953, the percentage of Han within its total population has risen to 40% today. In this context, maintaining a high level of fertility – even higher than that of their Kazakh or Kirghiz neighbours in the ex-Soviet republics, an average of one child more – seems to be the most elementary means, but perhaps eventually the most efficient, to resisting the Chinese invasion.

China, apparently contravening its own long-term interests, concedes to minorities occupying the most sensitive zones of friction – Tibetans of Tibet and Muslims of Xinjiang in particular – the privileges important in terms of limitation of births, thus authorizing a demographic growth far greater than that of the Han. Because Islam remains, China being no exception, a political force to be reckoned with, the Chinese government is in a way bound to satisfy the need for ethnic and religious affirmation of the peoples of Xinjiang, this region being an important strategic zone as well as a precious link to the Muslim world and the oil emirates. Hardly being able to counter their native traditions, China tried to dilute the effects of their natural growth rates through Han immigration.

However, this policy seems short-sighted. If the current rhythm of Muslim population growth in Xinjiang is maintained (+2.5% annually, compared to the +1.5% for the Han) it will double between 1990 and 2020. It will then become – should the installations of Han migrants in Xinjiang cease – with its 18 million people, a majority of approximately 70% in this region, as compared to its slightly over 50% currently.

At present, China is attempting to fill in the gaps by waves of controlled migrations, and is using repression to maintain its hold on Xinjiang: closing Koranic schools and mosques, imprisoning imams, confiscating religious works, and arresting dissidents. But can the nation-state resist much longer the centripetal manifestations, especially when these receive the reinforcement of such an impressive demography? ◆

Figure 1. Evolution of the average number of children per woman for the Han and the principal Muslim ethnic groups, 1970–1990

