

The Religious Life of Ethnic Minority Communities

Philip L. Wickeri and Yik-fai Tam

The best-selling Chinese novel *Wolf Totem* is set against the background of a student's experience of life among the Mongol people during the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976). Drawing on his own experiences as a youth sent down to be “re-educated” in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, Jiang Rong writes about the Mongols, their nomadic freedom, their attachment to nature, and their spirituality.¹ The wolf totem is an object to be both feared and revered, a symbol of nomadic freedom, but also a challenge to the supposed “sheepishness” of the Han majority. The novel reflects a romanticism about the culture of the Mongol people, and has provoked a variety of responses in China and overseas. Is it a call to Chinese nationalism or a celebration of the freedom of an ethnic minority? Does it proclaim an ethnocentric ideology or is it a wake up call to China's looming environmental problem? Beyond all the controversial interpretations, *Wolf Totem* tells an engaging story about the encounter between the Han Chinese and the culture and religion of the Mongol people, one of China's fifty-five recognized ethnic minorities.²

China's minorities have been much in the news in recent years. Television images of robed Tibetan monks demonstrating on the streets of Lhasa and protestors from the predominantly Muslim Uyghur minority in China's far west have focused world attention on ethnic religious communities in China. Such stories reflect the potentially explosive aspects of the encounters between Han Chinese and minority religious communities, a subject that is discussed elsewhere in this book in terms of the challenges they pose for political authority. But the religious life of ethnic minorities in China is a subject that is both deeper and more extensive: Naxi people in southwest China performing age-old shamanistic rituals; growing numbers of Muslims coming to terms with Islamic life in a globalized world; Lisu and Miao Christians worshipping in newly established Protestant and Catholic churches in the mountains of Yunnan; Tibetan Buddhists maintaining their temples and continuing traditional religious practices despite decades of repression. To gain

perspective on these headline-grabbing events, we need to consider more carefully the religious practices and beliefs of China's diverse minorities.

The overwhelming majority of China's population of just over 1.3 billion is Han Chinese, and they are the focus of most of the chapters in this volume except this one. This chapter surveys the variety of religious traditions, communities, and practices among the minority ethnicities of China. We will move from coastal and inland China to the periphery, the borders and mountainous areas where most ethnic minority groups live. In the previous chapter, the Chinese idiom "Every five or ten miles, local customs are not the same" was introduced to emphasize the diversity of religious practices in rural villages. If this is the case with majority Chinese religious communities, it is even more so for ethnic minorities in China and their religious practices. From far western Xinjiang Autonomous Region to the island of Taiwan, and from the Siberian border in the northeast to the mountains of the southwest, minority communities in China have been shaped by their religious traditions, some of which date back many millennia. These traditions include a wide array of inherited and acquired religious practices, including indigenous religious beliefs and various expressions of shamanism, as well as different forms of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Christianity. Some of the religious traditions are unique to the minority groups, while others are contextualized adaptations of majority Han religious practices. As is the case with all Chinese religious communities, the minority religions have experienced a revival over the last three decades.

Minority groups in mainland China are found mostly in the border regions on China's periphery, in sparsely populated provinces and autonomous regions that constitute more than 50% of China's landmass. These areas are today marked by boundaries separating different countries, but national boundaries are of recent origin, and they have been porous and fluid even in modern times. For some ethnic groups, attachment to the land has both religious and political significance. Minority peoples in the southwest are related to ethnic groups in Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and there continues to be much traffic and exchange back and forth. The same is true of the Islamic minorities in the far west who are related to their counterparts in the countries of Central Asia and beyond. Cultural Tibet once included a large part of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau, and not just the present day Tibet Autonomous Region—as well as parts of the Himalayan regions of Kashmir, Nepal, Bhutan, and northeast India. In northeast China, Koreans and Mongols are related to peoples across their borders that now live in separate countries. As we shall see, the transnational nature of ethnic minorities has deep significance for the people themselves as well as for the Chinese government.

The government of the People's Republic of China recognizes fifty-six ethnicities in China, the majority Han Chinese and fifty-five national ethnic minorities. According to the 2000 census, ethnic minorities numbered about 106 million people, or almost 9% of the Chinese population. The real picture is a great deal more complex, for the self-perception of minority ethnic groups is often at odds with

their official classification. For example, there are many subdivisions or branches of minority groups, with their own languages and cultures that could easily be regarded as separate ethnicities in their own right. There are also “unrecognized minorities” (including the Jews and the Sherpas), several hundred of which have applied for official recognition; and almost 800,000 individuals who are listed as “unclassified.”³

The very conceptualization of what it means to be an ethnic group or a “minority nationality” is a contested category of understanding. Scholars emphasize the social and historical construction of ethnic identities, and warn against the “exotic representation” of minority groups in China. Ongoing debates about the “essentializing of ethnicity” are now common in academic conferences in the West. The idea of the “Han people” has had different meanings at various periods in history, and some studies question whether Han people themselves can be regarded as an undifferentiated ethnicity. Chinese have historically viewed all minority communities as “the other,” culturally and religiously. This means that in many different ways, minorities have been oppressed and subject to prejudice and discrimination, despite legal safeguards and government-sponsored affirmative action programs. Some scholars have advanced alternative understandings of cultural ethnicity in China. There is clearly a more complex and nuanced view of the minority situation in China than what is implied in the existing identification of fifty-five minority ethnic groups.

While recognizing this complexity, our chapter focuses on the religious practices and beliefs of some of the officially recognized minority groups, about which there is a scholarly consensus. After an overview of the Chinese context and the diversity of minority religious practices, we consider the religions of a few groups in greater detail.

Minority Religious Communities in the Chinese Context

Ethnic religious communities in the People’s Republic of China face situations that are in many ways similar to minorities in other countries. (In China, ethnic communities are not designated as “indigenous” peoples in the sense that that term is used elsewhere.) They negotiate issues of identity and assimilation with the majority (Han) culture; they face challenges in maintaining religious beliefs and practices in a world of modernization and economic development; they live out and express religious and ethnic identities that are both contextual and transnational at the same time. Minorities in China respond to these challenges in a variety of ways, even within the same ethnic group. There is a continuum between what might be termed a “pure” religious or ethnic expression (if this were possible) and total social integration and assimilation (if that were possible), with a great many mediating positions. All of these have a political dimension that must be considered in any discussion of religion in China.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Chinese government had one overriding interest in dealing with questions of ethnicity: maintaining a unified China. Given the history of religiously inspired ethnic rebellions and the complex international politics of Chinese border regions, the government's preoccupation with national unity is not difficult to understand. Chinese Communists inherited policies aimed at establishing a unified, multiethnic country from the government of the Republican era (1911–1949), but these became much more strictly enforced in the People's Republic of China. In the 1950s the new regime consolidated its power in ways that involved the unification of minority areas and the assertion of government control over every aspect of popular religious life. This intensified in the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976) when all religious practices were suppressed. Mosques, temples, and churches were closed; monks, nuns, and priests were secularized or, in some places, forced to take spouses; religious leaders were paraded through the streets and humiliated, imprisoned, or even executed. This period came to an end in the late 1970s with the accession of Deng Xiaoping as paramount leader. The Reform and Opening era initiated an unprecedented period of religious tolerance and ethnic autonomy, which has in turn made possible the revival of minority religious communities.

Over the past thirty years, there has been a renewal of the public expression of religious belief and practice all over China. The government policy of "ethnic autonomy" for minority areas has been restored and developed further, and this has had a positive impact on cultural and religious life, despite continuing ethnic tensions. There are today 5 autonomous regions, almost 100 autonomous counties, and hundreds of autonomous villages and townships. The administration of these areas has afforded a measure of tolerance for religious belief and practices. China has changed a great deal since the late 1970s, but there are still strict limits to the full exercise of religious freedom. Religion is not allowed to interfere with politics or education; political control is maintained through official religious organizations and designated leaders who are acceptable to the government; and all activities that might promote "splittism" or political independence, especially among the Islamic minorities and Tibetan Buddhists, are closely monitored. In the case of minority religious communities, religion and politics are not easily separated.

At the same time, more open policies have made possible the growth and revival of religion. This has been assisted by permissive government attitudes to minority cultural and religious life. Ethnic minorities enjoy certain privileges. In contrast to the Han majority, minority families are allowed to have more than one child, for example, and minorities are given preferential treatment on the university entrance exams. China's concern for improved international relations with Islamic countries that supply oil and other natural resources that are essential for economic development, as well as an interest in promoting international tourism, have also shaped more tolerant policies. In addition, minority religious communities have benefited from increased attention to the academic study of religion in institutions such as the Central Nationalities University in Beijing and regional universities and centers for social scientific research.

Rapid economic development and the integration of China into the global market challenge minority religious communities in different ways. In some cases, religion may help to foster economic modernization. Korean Chinese are the wealthiest and best-educated ethnic group in the country, in part due to the interest that South Korean Christians have had in investment and economic development in northeast China. Religion has also helped to preserve tradition and inhibit economic progress, particularly in the case of some indigenous traditions. There are important regional variations in terms of intra-ethnic relations and government policy. The loosening of central control has resulted in greater religious pluralism as well as increasing contact with transnational religious communities, whether Buddhist, Islamic, or Christian. This has led to political tension and sometimes conflict between minority religious groups and the government. It has also created new opportunities for dialogue among religious communities, both nationally and internationally.

The Diversity of Religious Practices

The religious map of Chinese ethnic minorities is extremely complicated. Most of the ethnic minorities at one time had their own indigenous religious traditions. Although those traditions have survived only to a limited extent, religious and cultural practices in minority communities continue to reflect indigenous beliefs and traditions. A great many ethnic groups converted to different forms of Buddhism and Islam centuries ago, whereas others have converted to Protestant or Catholic Christianity more recently. Some minority religions are locally adapted forms of majority (Han) religious practices, but others are distinctive expressions of a given culture or ethnic group. Some minority nationalities collectively belong to a single religion, whereas others reveal more diverse religious affiliations that vary from place to place.

Various forms of shamanism and indigenous religious practices continue in a number of minority groups. The best known among these is the *dongba* religion among the Naxi in Yunnan, which is discussed in the case study that follows. Shamanism, as depicted in the novel *Wolf Totem*, is also practiced by the Mongols. Other ethnic minorities, including the Oroqen, Ewenki, and Daur, practice different forms of animism and shamanism. Even when minorities have converted to other religions, one can continue to see elements of indigenous religious beliefs in their new beliefs and practices.

Daoism is regarded as the only indigenous tradition among the five “world religions” (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism) with formally recognized religious organizations in China. Among Chinese minorities, Daoism is particularly prominent among the Zhuang, the largest of the fifty-five ethnic minorities. Its population of more than seventeen million lives in the Guangxi Autonomous Region and neighboring provinces. Although shamanistic and animistic practices

are not uncommon, their dominant religion is Daoism. Historical records show that Daoism and its related practices have been popular in the Guangxi region since the fifth and sixth centuries. Daoism is also prominent among the Yao people. It is also practiced by the Maonan people (in Guangxi), and to a lesser extent among other minorities in the southwest. Many of these Daoist ethnic groups are also widely dispersed in the hills and mountains of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar).

Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the early centuries of the Common Era, and after successive times of decline and revival, was firmly established by the eleventh century. Buddhism in Tibet was influenced by the indigenous Bön religion, but it was given formal religious, philosophical, and institutional expression by locally adapted Indian Buddhism. The overwhelming majority of Tibetans in China today (about 5.4 million) practice Tibetan Buddhism, and it would be impossible to separate Tibetan culture from the religious life of the people. Today, Tibetans live in the Tibet autonomous regions as well as in Qinghai, Sichuan and other areas. Historically, Tibetan Buddhism has also been especially important in Mongolia, where it incorporated elements of indigenous shamanism. To a limited extent, it is also found among the Yugur, the Tujia, and the Manchus.

The region known as the Tibet Autonomous Region was formally incorporated into the People's Republic of China in 1950. After a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, who was the political and religious leader of the Tibetans, fled to India with a large group of followers. There they established a government in exile that has become a center of Tibetan religion and culture, as well as a focal point of opposition to Chinese rule. The Chinese government has continually criticized the Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile for engaging in political activities aimed at promoting Tibetan independence. The Dalai Lama enjoys enormous international prestige, especially after he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. Besides this community in Dharamsala, Tibetan Buddhists are also found in Nepal, Europe, North America, and other parts of Asia.

Mahayana Buddhism is practiced among a number of southwestern minorities including the Zhuang, the Dai and the Bai people, who have contact with Han Chinese Buddhism. The Dai are predominantly Theravada Buddhist, and the Hani, Wa (or Va) and other minorities also have Theravada communities, and maintain communication with Buddhist centers in southeast Asia. Buddhism has almost disappeared among the Koreans in the northeast, who have become Protestant (and to a lesser extent Catholic) Christians in the course of the last century.

Muslim traders went to what is now northwest China within a few decades after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632. By the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907), mosques could be found in the capital of Chang'an (Xi'an) and in many other cities and trading towns along the Silk Road. Today, there are Muslims in every Chinese city. They maintain mosques and run their own restaurants and other businesses. Muslims are most numerous in western China and particularly in

the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Ten ethnic minorities are predominantly Muslim: the Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbeks, Tatars, Salar, Dongxiang, and Bonan. The Hui, who have been well integrated within China for many centuries, are the largest Muslim ethnicity (almost ten million people), followed closely by the Uyghur (8.4 million). Estimates vary, but scholars agree that there are at least twenty to thirty million Muslims in China (more than 2% of the population), almost all of whom are from the above-mentioned ten minority nationalities.

There is an enormous ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity among and often within Muslim ethnic groups in China. Most Muslim groups speak Turkic languages, but most Hui are Chinese speaking, and the Tajik are in the Persian language family. Many Chinese Muslims read and speak Arabic or Turkish. Most are Sunni, including those belonging to the different Sufi orders, but there are different forms of Shiite and Wahhabi traditions within the ten minority nationalities as well. China now has the largest Muslim community in East Asia, and its Muslim population surpasses that of Saudi Arabia.

Oriental Orthodox Christian traders, missionaries, and priests (from the East Syrian Church of the East) came to China in the Tang dynasty, from the seventh to tenth centuries. Like Muslims, Manicheans, and Jews, they traveled the Silk Road and established churches and Christian communities. At different times in China's history, many Mongolians and Turkic-speaking peoples were predominantly Christian. A Russian Orthodox mission was established in China in the seventeenth century, and there are still small Orthodox Christian communities in the Chinese Russian minority. Catholic missionaries worked among minorities in Tibet, Yunnan, and Sichuan beginning in the seventeenth century, and there are still churches among Tibetans that date from that time.

Protestant and Catholic missionaries worked in minority ethnic communities all over China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, there is a strong Christian presence among minority groups in northeast and southwest China, and among the aboriginal groups in Taiwan. The majority of the Miao and Lisu are Christians, and there are significant Protestant and Catholic minorities in other ethnic groups. In the last twenty years, small Protestant communities have been started among most of the national minorities by evangelists from China and missionaries from overseas.

Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian communities in China are shaped by their cultural contexts as well as by transnational religious movements. At the mosque in Lhasa, Hui Muslims chat with each other in Tibetan, not in Chinese. In Yunnan, recently converted Tibetan Protestants were evangelized by the Lisu, and still worship and read the Bible in that language. Muslims from the People's Republic of China have been going to Mecca on the Hajj since 1984. There are also regular travelers who go from Dharamsala to Lhasa and back, along the borders between China and Southeast Asia, and who do missionary work among South Koreans along the border between China and North Korea. All of this has implications for

BOX 3.1 Korean Missionaries in China

Korean Christian missionary work began in northeast China and in Shandong in the first part of the twentieth century. In the late 1970s, Korean Protestant churches began sending missionaries all over the world. In the process, South Korea became the most important Protestant missionary-sending country after the United States. Foreign missionary work is illegal in China, but South Koreans have been particularly interested in proselytizing among the Han Chinese and the ethnic minorities. Going to China as language students, teachers, businessmen, and doctors, Koreans began working in the northeast, but they soon moved to Beijing, Shanghai, and cities on the east coast. Their numbers grew, and an estimated 5,000 Koreans are working as “underground missionaries” in China. Today, Korean missionaries can be found in virtually every city in China, evangelizing Tibetans in Lhasa, Uyghurs in Urumchi, and Koreans along the North Korean border. Some Chinese Christians are critical of these efforts, and even some church leaders in South Korea have begun to question how effective such missionary work has been.

the appropriation of minority religious belief, movements of ethnic solidarity, and the political impact of religion on China as a whole.

We now turn to a consideration of religious belief and practice in four different minority communities. These do not exhaust the wide range and different modalities of religious expression, but they do illustrate the enormous religious diversity within ethnic minority communities in China.

Dongba among the Naxi People

The Naxi people (310,000 in all) are found primarily in northwestern Yunnan and southeastern Sichuan. They speak a Sino-Tibetan language, and their religion is known as Dongba, which is basically a type of shamanism that has been influenced by Tibetan Bön religion, Buddhism, and Daoism. *Dongba* refers to the title of their priests, and literally means “wise man.” The Dongba are the priests of various rituals and interpreters of the holy text, which is also known as *Dongba*. The ancestral founder of the Dongba religion was a Tibetan shaman who probably lived in the eastern part of Tibet around the twelfth century. According to Dongba tradition, he was known as Dingba Shilo.

The indigenous religious culture of the Naxi is similar in many respects to that of the Han described in chapter 2. The main difference is that the priests, instead of practicing Buddhist or Daoist liturgies like their Tibetan and Han neighbors, have their own Dongba ritual tradition, and ritual texts composed in a unique hieroglyphic script. Naxi people believe that there are spirits in natural phenomena and objects. The Dongba priests act as mediators between the spirits and humankind. In different Dongba rituals, the priests communicate with spirits found in natural



FIGURE 3.1 *Dongba shaman.* (Hui Yan/FOTOE)

phenomena as well as with ghosts. They are also exorcists and ritual performers for curing illnesses and seeking spiritual blessings in the community and in personal life.

The Naxi believe that the *Baidi* (White Land) in northwestern Yunnan province is their holy land. They have a saying, “Unless one goes to Baidi, one is not a real Dongba.” Zhongdian County, the Tibetan autonomous county in which Baidi is located, was renamed Shangri-La County in 2001, largely to encourage its potential as a tourist destination.

Dongba is not a highly institutionalized religion. Priests perform their religious roles and functions as individuals or in small groups. They do not form a hierarchical order, and they pass on their religious roles and knowledge through family tradition. Sons learn their knowledge and practices from their fathers and pass these on to their descendents. There are temples scattered among different settlements and villages, which do not form any structural relationship with each other.

Naxi religion and culture are protected by the Chinese government, and the Naxi community in Lijiang, Yunnan, is a popular tourist attraction. Their unique

writing system records Naxi religious beliefs and cultural practices. It resembles hieroglyphic scripts of earlier cultures and is the only such pictographic script still in use in the world today.

Tibetan Buddhism

Known as “the roof of the world,” the Tibetan plateau is a difficult place in which to live. Despite the harsh conditions, Tibetans are proud of their cultural heritage and traditional lifestyle. Most of them live in widely scattered settlements. Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, was actually a city of only two main roads just a few decades ago. It is now a crowded urban area with a booming economy. The relationship between Han Chinese and the Tibetan people has not improved because of the economic development and the modernization, however. Although Tibetan people have benefited from the developing economy, the concern about losing their cultural and religious identity, especially among a new generation of Tibetans, is evident, even to the casual observer.

Tibetan Buddhism is a religious tradition practiced by the Tibetans, the Mongolians, and other neighboring peoples such as the Bhutanese. It is a complex tradition that has been influenced by Indian Tantric practices and Mahayana Buddhism, as well as beliefs and practices of the indigenous Bön religion. The current practice of Tibetan Buddhism is actually a combination of elements from various traditions.

According to the Tibetan tradition, two princesses (one from Nepal and the other from China) were married to the Tibetan ruler and brought different Buddhist schools and practices to Tibet in the first centuries of the Common Era. Yet, the Buddhist influences were mainly confined to the imperial court. Monasteries were built and translations of sutras from India and China began, but the majority of the Tibetan people did not know about this religion. Royal patronage of Buddhism was stopped with the accession to the throne of a new ruler who favored the native Bön religion. The second wave of introduction occurred in the tenth century and successfully penetrated into the cultural structures of the Tibetan people. It was in the thirteenth century that the leader of the Gelugpa school, who had converted the Mongolian khan (ruler), received from him the honorific title of Dalai Lama. Literally, the title *Dalai Lama* means “religious teacher whose wisdom is as deep and vast as the ocean.” Gradually, he became both the religious and political leader of the Tibetan people.

Tibetan Buddhism forms a significant part of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. It is also known as Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism or the Diamond Vehicle. It is known as Esoteric Buddhism because it considers that the ultimate Truth of the Dharma is not communicable through language or in public. It can be passed on between masters and disciples only through different ritual activities, such as the fire ritual, and gestures, such as hand signs. The Sanskrit term *Vajra* literally means

“thunderbolt” (a legendary weapon used by Buddhist deities) or “diamond.” It is used to describe the utmost effectiveness of this form of Buddhism in destroying any obstacles to achieving final enlightenment. Vajrayana Buddhists believe that the dharma is communicated to humankind in two ways: the historical way and the Tantric way. The historical way refers to the Buddhist teachings that rely on studying the doctrines and ideas of sutras.

The Tantric way refers to the yogic and tantric practices that culturally originated in Hinduism. It is believed that there exist certain forms of spiritual energies within the human body. Tantric ritual practices are learned and used to meditate on these energies in order to speed up the process of enlightenment. These were also influenced by the native Tibetan Bön religion. There are three typical kinds of religious practices in this esoteric Buddhist tradition: mudra, mantra, and mandala. The mudra is ritual or symbolic gesture, in other words, hand signs. The mantra is a ritual word, phrase, or formula said to communicate the essence of true Buddhist teachings. The mandala is visual diagram, usually in circular form, with colorful patterns that can help practitioners to meditate.

Pilgrimage is an important religious activity for Tibetan Buddhists. On the different routes from the scattered towns to Lhasa, one can see small groups or individual Tibetan Buddhists bowing and kneeling along the roads. They chant mantras or sutras all the way to their destination. For most of the pilgrims, who are laypeople as well as monks and nuns, the journey will take many months to finish. They recite their mantras using prayer wheels and rosaries. Mantras, prayers, and sutras are carved on prayer wheels set in temples and available for visitors. The most common mantra is “Om Mani Padme Hum,” which can be interpreted in many different ways. It is a prayer to Chenrezi (the Tibetan title of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, who is known as Guanyin in Chinese—see chapter 6). Tibetan Buddhists chant mantras and pray spontaneously throughout the day.

Tibetans believe that the Dalai Lama is actually the incarnation of Chenrezi, and that the present Dalai Lama is the fourteenth in this line. In Tibetan homes, a picture of the Dalai Lama is one of the most sacred religious objects, even though the government forbids the public display of such images. The term *lama* means religious teacher and is usually used as an honorific title for eminent Tibetan monks. The two most important lamas in Tibetan Buddhism are the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. Tibetans believe that Dalai and Panchen are incarnations of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion and the Amitabha Buddha, respectively. They are the leaders of two different sects within the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. There are three other important schools: Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya. The Gelugpa school is the newest but most important one. Tibetan Buddhists believe that eminent monks can achieve such a high level of consciousness that their consciousnesses can be reincarnated in another physical body after their death.

Traditionally, the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama have also enjoyed tremendous political influence and authority in Tibet. As a result, for centuries, political factions in Tibet, as well as the Chinese government, have often tried to influence the

process by which a child is identified as the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, and to control the upbringing and education of the child. Since the mid-1990s, a controversy over this issue has erupted between the Chinese government and Tibetans loyal to the Dalai Lama over the identification of the new Panchen Lama. (See chapter 11.) After the Dalai Lama approved the selection of one boy, the child disappeared and has not been heard from since. Another boy was then enthroned as the Panchen Lama by the Chinese authorities and he regularly appears in the Chinese media.⁴

Islam among the Uyghurs

The call to prayer is announced through electronic speakers from the towers surrounding the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar. On Friday afternoons, men begin to gather in the courtyard and proceed into the Hall of Prayer. There they take off their shoes or sandals and unroll their prayer rugs. Some go to the mosque five times each day, but Friday afternoons are always a special occasion. Ten or twenty thousand Uyghurs gather, coming from the neighborhood, the city, and the surrounding towns. On special occasions such as the Corban festival, the number of worshippers can be double that number or even more. Women are not part of this public service of worship. The short service includes readings in Arabic from the Koran, as well as an order of daily prayers. After the service, the worshippers go into the surrounding park and courtyard to visit, sell their wares, and talk together.

The Id Kah Mosque is one of ninety in this southern city in Xinjiang. Built in 1442, the historic mosque is centrally located in a beautiful four-acre complex. It has a yellow brick facade, and intricate carvings and painted pictures adorn the ceiling and cedar pillars. Kashgar, which is known as Kashi in Chinese, is an important center of Uyghur religion, culture, and history. The westernmost city in China, it was once an important cultural and trading center on the Silk Road. In the last thirty years, Kashgar has become a favored tourist destination, as well as a commercial hub along the Karakorum Highway that links China, Pakistan, and the countries of central Asia. Despite the immigration of large numbers of ethnic Chinese to the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, Kashgar continues to be a Uyghur city, but with strategic and international importance for China.

The Uyghur people are the second largest Muslim ethnic group in China after the Hui, and arguably the least integrated minority. In contrast, the Hui have been almost totally assimilated and are often indistinguishable from the Han Chinese majority. Like all Muslims, the Uyghur do not drink alcohol or eat pork. Women are not prominent in the public life of Uyghur Islam, as they are in some other Chinese minority communities.⁵ Many Uyghurs who are Communist Party officials continue in their religious practices, and they sometimes go to mosques for prayers. This is in spite of the fact that the party forbids religious practice among its members.



FIGURE 3.2 *Uyghur Muslims praying at Id Kah Mosque, Kashgar, Xinjiang province. (Song Shijing/FOTOE)*

The Uyghur regard themselves as part of the larger *ummah*, and they maintain important relations with the international Muslim community. They have taken part in the Hajj to Mecca since the mid-1980s, and some Uyghur students have been sent to study at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Many Uyghurs have families and relatives overseas. Still, there are enormous internal divisions within the Uyghurs. As is the case for all Chinese Muslims, the majority of the Uyghur are Sunni, but intense religious conflicts persist among Sufi and non-Sufi religious orders, and there are important regional religious variations among Uyghur communities. Although they became Muslim in the tenth century, religion is not the only marker of Uyghur identity. Language, history, and an attachment to the land are also important for the self-definition of the people in China and Central Asia.⁶ The Uyghurs have their own self-constructed ethnogenesis and regard themselves as the “original people” of the Tarim basin.

The Chinese government keeps a close watch on the activities of the Uyghur and other Islamic groups and is particularly wary of pan-Islamic separatist movements. Rebiya Kadeer, a Uyghur businesswoman based in the United States, has a high international profile in the human rights community, and she now heads the World Uyghur Congress. Sporadic violent eruptions in Xinjiang have been attributed to Uyghur extremists. The most serious of these was in July 2009, when demonstrators took to the streets in Urumchi and other cities in Xinjiang in protest over a Han Chinese attack against Uyghur workers in a factory in southern China. The protests turned violent, and the fighting between Uyghurs and Han Chinese claimed 200

lives. This resulted in hundreds of arrests and the execution of a number of the alleged perpetrators. After September 11, China successfully pressed the United States to list one Uyghur group—the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)—as a “terrorist organization.” ETIM and other overseas-based Uyghur organizations have claimed responsibility for various bomb attacks in China in recent years. These attacks, and the Chinese government campaigns to “strike hard” against terrorism, have led to continuing tensions between Uyghurs and the Han, and to restrictions on Uyghur religious practices. (For more on these tensions, see chapter 11.)

International trade and increased electronic communications brought on by globalization add even greater complexity to the interaction of religion, ethnicity, and politics among the Uyghur and other Islamic minorities. It is likely that the tensions will increase rather than decrease in future years, even as Islam among the Uyghurs—and the Uyghur population as a whole—continues to grow.

Christianity and the Miao

It was just before sunrise, but the village church in the mountains of western Guizhou was almost full. Many of the Miao farmers had walked fifty kilometers or more to attend the Sunday service, and they had arrived the night before. They were young and old, more women than men. In the early morning hours, their children were just getting up. Everyone knew each other, and it seemed like the gathering of an extended family. At six, the adults began singing hymns, accompanied by a woman on a keyboard and led by a young man who was a teacher in the village school. Men and women sat on benches on opposite sides of the church. They held hymnals that had been printed locally on inexpensive paper. They also had Bibles in the (Miao) Pollard script, which had been printed at the Amity Printing Press in Nanjing. For many of the people, this was the only book they owned, and they had committed many verses to memory.

The service began at eight, led by a recently ordained pastor from this village. Prayers and Bible readings were followed by an hour-long sermon emphasizing the need to trust in the grace of Jesus Christ in all areas of life, and drawing on many examples from village life. When the service ended, the 200 or so people went out into the dusty village square for a simple meal of sweet potatoes, boiled eggs, peanuts, and pickled vegetables. Older women from the village did the cooking and made sure that everyone had enough to eat. The people lingered around the small circle of homes surrounding the church for several hours before they set out on their homeward journeys. They would all be back the next week.

There are similar scenes each Sunday morning in ethnic minority Protestant churches in townships and villages in the southwestern provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan where the Miao Christians are concentrated. In addition to Sunday services and special services at Christmas and during the Chinese Spring Festival, Miao Christians organize weekly meetings for prayer, healing, and Bible



FIGURE 3.3 *Miao Christians gathering for church service in Yunnan province. (Deng Quyaol FOTOE)*

study. According to the 2000 census, the Miao population is more than ten million, divided into three major linguistic subgroups.⁷ Miao people are also found in southeast Asia and immigrant communities in North America, where they are known as the Hmong. But it is among the Miao of China that Christianity is now flourishing.

The indigenous religion of the Miao was shamanistic, practiced in different ways among a variety of Miao subgroups. Samuel Pollard (1864–1915), an English Methodist, began Christian work among the Miao in Yunnan and Guizhou in 1891. He built a hospital in Zhaotong, Yunnan, which is still in use, and later established a mission station in Shimenkan, fifty kilometers or so to the east in Guizhou province. There he and his wife settled down, established a mission station, and built a chapel and a school. Pollard began to work on a script for the Miao language; a complete Miao New Testament based on his work was published in 1917. Other English missionaries joined the Pollards and continued their work with the Miao until the 1940s.

Even in Pollard's time, Miao people themselves did the primary work of evangelization. They challenged the indigenous shamanism and religious beliefs of the Miao, and many incidents of interreligious conflict have been recorded. After a slow beginning, the church grew, especially among the Hua ("Flowery") Miao in mountain villages in the Yunnan-Guizhou border regions. Lay preachers not only started churches, but also taught literacy in village-based schools. Their Christianity was of that of their Wesleyan Methodist teachers, with simple services centered on

the Bible, preaching, and hymn-singing. Christian faith appealed to the impoverished Miao, caught between Yi and Hui landlords, on one side, and the Chinese who regarded them as “barbarians” on the other. (Although the Miao people themselves have adopted it, the term *Miao*, meaning “seedlings,” shows the disparagement in which they were held.) By the early 1930s, Miao were in positions of leadership in local governments and schools.

The Communist government closed the village schools in the early 1950s, and the churches came under increasing pressure. Many church leaders were imprisoned, and the Pollard script was banned. Churches were closed during the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976), and areas such as Wuding County witnessed terrible violence against Christians well into the 1970s.⁸ With the reopening of churches and Christian meeting points in the 1980s, the churches began to experience a revival. Bibles and hymnals were reprinted, lay leaders attended provincial training courses, and young people went for seminary training in Nanjing and Kunming.

Today, a contextualized Christianity among the Miao has grown from the roots that were established in the first part of the twentieth century. Women are often found in leading roles in local churches. Miao Christians are well known all over China for their singing and their devotion to the church. There will continue to be divisions between registered and unregistered churches, and between Christians and followers of indigenous shamanism. Many young Christians go off to the cities in search of jobs and a better education. They send money home, and visit when they can, and so the mountain churches are much stronger than they were before. Estimates vary, but in Yunnan, up to three-quarters of the Miao are said to be Christians. This means they are more than half of the officially recognized 600,000 ethnic minority Christians in the province,⁹ far outnumbering the Han Christians in the region.

Conclusion

As we have seen, minority religious communities have experienced renewal and revival over the last thirty years, in a variety of forms and practices. Despite continuing pressures from government policy, ethnic tensions, and the challenges of economic modernization, the growth of religion in China’s ethnic communities continues.

The religious pluralism present within the officially designated national minorities is both a challenge and an opportunity. In relationships with one another, particularly in the autonomous regions, pluralism presents an opportunity for interreligious dialogue in order to promote mutual understanding in a globalized world. Interreligious dialogue is now being encouraged by the government in certain places. It should be added that some religious beliefs and traditions tend to militate against dialogue, especially within the Christian and Islamic communities in China. For the minorities, the vastly different ethnicities and the many differences within recognized ethnic groups further complicate the picture.

Globalization and economic modernization may either encourage dialogue or work against it. As people are brought into closer contact, there may be an effort to understand one another's culture and religion, but closer contact may also result in increased tension that can lead to conflict and violence. Transnational religious movements, the growing importance of religion in international affairs, the attention to ethnicity as a global political force, and the rise of China as an economic and political power all have their impact on minority religious communities in the People's Republic. No discussion of religion and public life in China, therefore, can afford to ignore the many ways in which minority ethnic communities contribute to an understanding of how religion will shape our common future.

Notes

1. Jiang Rong, *Wolf Totem: A Novel*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (London: Penguin, 2008). Jiang Rong is the pseudonym of an author who is now a university professor in Beijing.
2. For an overview of Chinese ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China, see Colin MacKerras, *China's Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994) as well as the same author's *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalization* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2003). There are excellent but brief sections on minority culture and religion in both books. For essays on different approaches to ethnic identity in China, see William Safran, ed., *Nationalism and Ethnoregional Identities in China* (London: Frank Cross, 1998).
3. Dru C. Gladney, *Dislocating China: Muslims, Minorities and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.
4. For an overview of Tibetan Buddhism today, see Melvyn C. Goldstein and Matthew T. Kapstein, *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: Religious Revival and Cultural Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
5. Among the Hui and other Muslim minorities, women play a more prominent role. There are even women imams and women's mosques. See Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own* (Surrey: Curzon, 2000).
6. Dru C. Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?" *China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003): 457; also Gladney, *Dislocating China*, 219.
7. Norma Diamond, "Christianity and the Hua Miao: Writing and Power," *Christianity in China: from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 139.
8. See Philip L. Wickeri, "The Abolition of Religion in Yunnan," *The Terrible Alternative: Christian Martyrdom in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Chandler (London: Cassell, 1998), 128–143.
9. Xuezheng Yang, ed., *Yunnan zongjiao qingshi baogao, 2006–2007* (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2007).