



China

# China's Ethnic Groups and Religions

ZHENG QIAN

TRANSLATED BY HOU XIAOCUI, RONG XUEQIN & HUANG YING

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## 图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

中国民族与宗教: 英文 / 郑茜著; 侯晓萃, 戎雪勤, 黄颖译. —北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2010.1

ISBN 978-7-5085-1685-1

I. ①中… II. ①郑… ②侯… ③戎… ④黄… III. ①民族政策—中国—英文 ②宗教政策—中国—英文 IV. ① D63

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2009) 第 191072 号

总 顾 问 / 王 晨

总 策 划 / 王仲伟

总 监 制 / 郭长建

出 版 人 / 李向平

主 编 / 吴 伟

## 中国民族与宗教

著 者 / 郑 茜

翻 译 / 侯晓萃 戎雪勤 黄 颖

责任编辑 / 苏 谦

装帧设计 / 田 林 傅晓斌

制 作 / 北京原色印象文化艺术中心

图片提供 / 中国新闻图片网 中国日报新闻图片网 视觉中国 东方 IC

出版发行 / 五洲传播出版社 (北京市海淀区北小马厂 6 号 邮编: 100038)

电 话 / 8610 - 58891281 (发行部)

网 址 / [www.cicc.org.cn](http://www.cicc.org.cn)

承 印 者 / 北京博海升彩色印刷有限公司

版 次 / 2010 年 1 月第 1 版第 1 次印刷

开 本 / 787 × 1092 毫米 1/16

定 价 / 96.00 元

# Foreword

Through its reform and opening to the outside world, China has worked an economic miracle and boosted its comprehensive strength, enhancing its standing in the international community. As more and more people around the world are eager to know and understand China, we have compiled the China Series, aiming to provide a shortcut for readers to get the basic facts about this country.

The 12 titles in this series cover China's geography, history, politics, economy, culture, law, diplomacy, national defense, and society, as well as its science, technology and education; its environment; and its ethnic groups and religions. These writings will help readers acquire a basic knowledge of China.

It is our hope that this series will enable readers to get a general idea about China:

Chinese history, culture and civilization, which is the oldest continuous major civilization in the world;

China's basic conditions—the world's largest developing country with a huge population, a country that is developing unevenly on a poor economic base; in light of these conditions, China is following its own path to sustainable development while learning from other civilizations; and

China's future—led by the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese people are focusing their efforts on economic development and carrying on reform and opening-up; they are building a harmonious society in their own country and working for a harmonious world with lasting peace and common prosperity.

We expect that through these books our readers will begin a new journey of discovery—understanding China.

January 2010

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# Preface

As a brief introduction to the ethnic groups and religions in China, this book has to leave out many events and people. Instead, it gives a concise elaboration and some relevant numbers.

I am deeply grateful that as a journalist that has worked on minority news reports for over 20 years, I have had opportunities to know the events that show a sense of history and to be in contact with people who promote progress. In this process, I realize, perhaps more deeply than others, that those who really speak about history are the ones that are likely to be submerged by it.

Therefore, along with the faithful and concise elaboration in the main body of this book, I think telling a story here may be a helpful addition.

In 1950, the invincible and victorious troops of the Chinese People's Liberation Army came to a stop at the foot of the A-Wa Mountain in Yunnan Province.

The troops had received an order from the Southwestern Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party to suspend the march until they determined the situation in the ethnic region and won the support of ethnic minority peoples there.

A-Wa Mountain held a compact of communities of the Va minority. La Meng was a remarkably respected headman who had led his people against both British troops and later the Japanese invasion. He was a man with a lot of self-esteem.

La Meng observed the Chinese People's Liberation Army camped outside A-Wa Mountain closely. He expected gunshots,

but instead an ethnic work group came and invited him to participate in a delegation to watch the National Day Parade in Beijing.

This proud headman told his guests frankly: "We fought Britons when they invaded. We fought Japanese when they invaded. We also fought Kuomintang. Now comes the Liberation Army and I haven't discerned yet."

He was not lying. Over the last 100 years, wars on A-Wa Mountain had always been caused by outsiders, including British, Japanese and Kuomintang troops that looted mineral resources and occupied the land.

In order to celebrate the first anniversary of the founding of the PRC, the central government decided to invite ethnic representatives to watch the parade in Beijing. At that time, it was not clear yet how many ethnic groups there were in China, but the central government demanded that "not a single ethnic group or a representative figure should be left out."

In other places, it was a great honor for many people to visit Beijing. On the A-Wa Mountain, however, none of the 18 headmen wanted or agreed to go to Beijing.

After patient and repeated efforts by the ethnic work group, La Meng changed his attitude. He decided to use *Da Jigua* to tell the fortune in accordance with the traditional religion of the Va minority. *Da Jigua* is a practice in which many small bamboo sticks are placed in a tiny hole in a piece of chicken bone and the different patterns woven by these sticks convey different messages.

He got a string of bad omens until one day he got a lucky one, so he made up his mind to go. But the moment he stepped out of door, he saw a bird overhead flying in the opposite direction. He stopped immediately: "The bird has conveyed the god's message to us that this journey is extremely ominous and I should not go!"



La Meng closed his door again. However, the work group waited for him patiently. Where there is a will, there is a way. At last, La Meng agreed to go.

The sacred wooden drums of the Va minority were played for La Meng. But this time, what kind of rhyme should these drums play—for campaigns, for alarms, or for festivals? The rhyme played for La Meng was ambiguous and unclear. This had never happened before. Who could tell whether La Meng should leave or not?

La Meng first walked on foot, then rode horses, then took trucks and finally planes. On the plane he was dizzy and sick. When he arrived in Beijing at last he thought he was ill. Then the notice came that Premier Zhou Enlai was to invite them to dinner!

As if a stream of lifeblood was injected into his body, his illness seemed not that terrible any more. "I will go, I will go!" That night, he saw Premier Zhou. What an affable and kind person! Premier Zhou paid great respect to every ethnic representative present. La Meng had never seen a "high-level" official who was so affable.

The National Day Parade started on time on October 1<sup>st</sup>. In the ethnic delegation to watch the parade, 34 were ethnic headmen of various ethnic groups in Yunnan Province. What a splendid and exciting scene! The army passed by; the navy passed by; when an enormous sound came from the sky, La Meng looked up and saw the fighters of the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

He was shocked. This once poor and disunited country was already completely different. He burst into tears.

On the platform, La Meng suddenly felt that he was also the master of this country.

Soon the day came when they were to meet Chairman Mao. After paying their tribute, every ethnic representative went onto the platform and shook hands with Chairman

Mao.

Chairman Mao's palm was so wide and soft! It left a deep impression engraved in the mind of La Meng, headman of the Va minority.

After saying farewell to Beijing, La Meng visited Shanghai, Wuhan and Chongqing along with other members of the ethnic minority delegation, and then came back to Yunnan.

Instead of going straight back home, La Meng went to attend a delegation conference of ethnic solidarity held in Pu'er. At the conference, he and another headman Li Bao made a joint proposal: in order to achieve the everlasting solidarity of all ethnic groups, we should always follow the lead of the Communist Party of China! According to old Va minority customs, we should take an oath!

Oath-taking is a folk tradition with a long history. As a credit guarantee of personal relations, oath-taking sets up a self-disciplined system in a worship culture. When facing important events or serious disputes, people tend to build a solid relation of mutual-trust by taking oaths before the gods.

All the delegates from southern Yunnan Province received this proposal warmly and immediately decided that an oath ceremony be held in Pu'er city.

The oath ceremony of the Va minority in which an ox was slaughtered and sacrificed was very grand, solemn and mysterious. La Meng was unanimously elected as the ox slaughterer by all the delegates.

The oath ceremony was held on December 26<sup>th</sup> 1950. All the delegates from 26 ethnic communities—including sub-groups—from 15 counties of Pu'er gathered in Hong Chang.

According to old Va tradition, if the ox falls over to the south after being killed, it is auspicious; if it topples over to the north, it is an omen of failure for the oath. In that case,

the ceremony should not proceed and all agreements should be canceled.

To the accompaniment of wooden drums, La Meng, although in his 60s, displayed consummate skills. He stabbed the ox right in the vital point in his first try.

All the people watched the ox stumbling around, eager to know the outcome. Finally, the ox fell to the south as it was hoped and the crowd burst into thunderous acclaim.

Afterwards, La Meng and other delegates agreed to write down the "oath of solidarity" on a piece of red paper with every person's signature. Then a monument was set up.

That is the "Monument of Ethnic Solidarity." The inscription is still very clear after more than half a century. It says that:

On behalf of all ethnic minorities in Pu'er, we, delegates from 26 ethnic groups, hereby have taken an oath by stabbing the ox and drinking the sacred water, to unite together under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and devote ourselves to building a great nation of equality, freedom and happiness.

Back at home, La Meng told his fellow villagers: Ximeng is merely a tiny place compared with the vast land of the whole country. Only by following the government and the Communist Party of China can we have a bright future.

We are able to truly understand the logic of history thanks to its richness and vividness. The above story gives us a glimpse of how the new government won the trust of ethnic minorities with its sincerity, respect and equal treatment 60 years ago, and inspired their hope for a brand new future after almost a century of colonial invasions, wars, social chaos and impoverished lives since the Opium War.

In history, Chinese ethnic groups have always taken national unity as the highest political ideal and value pursuit. The People's Republic of China has resumed this historical

value and won itself a brand new future.

The story may serve as the starting line to understand contemporary Chinese ethnic groups and religions. From here, you can begin your exploration into the general historical elaboration in this book.



# Nationality or Ethnic Group?





## A Historical Deviation

For China, a five-thousand-year-old civilization, the Opium War in 1848 can be described as a gigantic axe that brutally split Chinese history and culture. As Western modernity flooded in all at once from then on, China also entered its own modern history. Everything in the country began to change at the dawning of this period of time.

A major part of modern Chinese history has seen the absorption of Western culture, either consciously or unconsciously. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese people hastily accepted a variety of Western concepts, among which was the term “nation” or “nationality.” A study of the introduction of this Western terminology enables us to learn how Chinese combine Western modernity with their own traditions amid misconception and tortuousness.

Natio is originally a Latin word meaning birthplace or biological descent. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the European bourgeoisie began to rise quickly, the emerging class upgraded the ancient Latin word to nation with the meaning of “a common language, region, economic life (common tariff) and culture.” It was used as a powerful weapon against the feudal system. In 1789, Augustine Barlow, a French missionary, first used the word nationalism to refer to a social force “that overthrows the feudal monarchial regime.” Under the slogan of “One Nation, One State,” the emerging Bourgeoisie successfully launched a series of social revolutions. When Bourgeois revolutions in Europe ended in 1871, a group of monoethnic states had been founded. In this sense, the words “nation” and “state” finally became one concept in modern European history.

When referring to the “nation-state” theory of the modern West, it should be noted that its core concept—“nation”—takes the shape of a state.

European capitalism subsequently began colonial conquests around the world and thus spread the “nation-state” theory beyond Europe. However, China had already been a unified multiethnic country for two thousand years when this notion entered. What sort of deviation would occur if the concept of nation and the “nation-state” theory, born in the modern West, was transplanted into China’s historical and cultural background?

In fact, China’s bourgeois revolution also tried to use Western theories and ideas of nationalism to launch a popular movement for national salvation. But the Chinese bourgeoisie encountered the problem of the *minzu* (ethnic group).

The main enemy facing the bourgeois revolution in modern

China has been a unified multi-ethnic country since ancient times, and thus far 56 ethnic groups have been identified.





China was the government under the rule of the Manchu nobility of the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911). In other words, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the overthrow of centralized dictatorship was the same as toppling the rule of the Manchu nobility. As a result, in order to drive the Qing government off the historical stage, there was no better slogan than “National revolution.” In 1905, when Sun Zhongshan, the pioneer of China’s Bourgeois Revolution (1866–1925), founded the United League (*Tong meng hui*) with various bourgeois political parties, the objective he put forth in the oath was: expelling the Manchus, restoring the Han, founding a republic and equally dividing the land ownership.

Soon, however, these first bourgeois revolutionaries became aware of the following problem in practice: besides the ethnic Han group, China also had a great number of other ethnic groups which had all been living on the territory of the unified country ever since ancient times, also contributing to the creation of China’s five-thousand-year-old history and culture. Therefore the question was raised: Is the newly established Republic of China going to include these ethnic groups?

If not, the decision would have been clearly and evidently inconsistent with Chinese history and the unique Chinese cultural tradition that had been in existence for thousands of years.

Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a famous Chinese bourgeoisie thinker, put forth his own doctrine of “nationalism” in earlier times: to fight against the colonial conquest by imperialism, the Chinese people must unite Hans, Manchus, Huis, Miaos, and Tibetans to form one great ethnic group.

In his inaugural address in 1912, Sun Zhongshan, the provisional president of the Republic of China, told the whole world: “The foundation of the country lies in the people; and the unification of lands inhabited by the Han, Manchu,

Mongol, Hui and Tibetan people, into one country, means the unification of the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui and Tibetan ethnic groups. It is called national unification." He further pointed out that ethnic groups all belong to this unified Republic of China, meaning one ethnic group should not dominate over another, nor should there be any hostility against Manchu people.

During this period, Tsarist Russia instigated then-Jebtsundamba Khutuktu in Outer Mongolia to declare "independence." At the time, princes of 10 banners, the administrative division of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, in Jirem League convened two princely conferences of eastern Mongolia in succession to discuss how to fight Outer Mongolia's "independence." In early 1913, princes of 34 banners in 22 parts of western Mongolia also held a princely conference and decided to team up with eastern Mongolian princes to oppose independence. They issued a telegram statement: "Mongolian territory and the Chinese inland are interdependent, and Hans and Mongolians have been family for centuries. We Mongolians also belong to the Chinese nation, and therefore, should contribute to maintain the unity of the Republic."

It was a solemn political proclamation which shows that even in modern times, when the Western "nation-state" theory was widely spread and put into practice around the world, China's destiny and each ethnic group's choice were still determined by China's unique tradition as well as the mentality formed during its long history and culture.

The Manifesto of the First National Congress of the Kuomintang, issued in 1924, further elaborated China's "nationalism." Kuomintang's nationalism had two meanings: firstly, the Chinese nation seeks liberation independently; and secondly, ethnic groups within China are all equal.

In other words, although Chinese people in modern times