

# Nowhere to Call Home: Ethnic Minorities in China

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## Rob Gifford

Welcome to this evening's event, *Nowhere to Call Home: Ethnic Minorities in China*. I'm Rob Gifford. Until recently I was the China editor of *The Economist*, just been rotated onto writing about other things, tragically, as happens, but still keeping an eye on China and we are going to be talking specifically about Tibetans and seeing some clips from Jocelyn's film.

Let me introduce her to you. Jocelyn Ford, who I've known for some years, we were correspondents in Beijing together where she worked for Marketplace and before that for Marketplace in Tokyo, the big economic radio programme that goes out on PRI, kind of, what's it the equivalent of? It's like a Radio 4, what's the Tim Harford programme called about economics, looking at the economic issues and financial issues in China and Jocelyn was the correspondent in Tokyo and in Beijing for them and travelled widely throughout Asia.

Dr Reza Hasmath is a tutor in the politics of China at Hartford College, Oxford, among other things. His CV is truly international, multidisciplinary, he's the original Renaissance man it seems, but has recently also been in western China. So can talk from his own research, just within the last year, in Xinjiang and in Tibet. It's a sensitive issue, obviously dealing with minorities in China, as anyone who has sort of dealt with the subject over the years knows how sensitive it is when you're talking with Chinese officials, when you're talking with Chinese people. We're dealing with history, with memory, with propaganda, all these extremely sensitive issues, what goes to making up a nation, what does it mean to be Chinese if you're a Uyghur or a Tibetan, are you Chinese, what is your identity, identity politics.

All of these are subjects that Jocelyn and Reza are going to be touching on throughout the evening and then we'll have a time to ask questions at the end. So, without further ado, I'm going to hand over to Jocelyn. Do you have the controls?

## Jocelyn Ford

Okay, well, thank you very much for the introduction and I must say, it's an honour to be here with an audience that is concerned about these issues. I'm pleased to be able to introduce my film a little bit, but more than that, to talk about ethnic minority issues and especially to share my experience dealing with so-called 'sensitive issues'. It's a word that I actually reject, I think we should stop talking about sensitive issues so that we can normalize them, but really, you know, how do you deal with things that have traditionally been, conventionally been taboo in China?

I'm not going to say I have all the answers. I have a lot more questions. One of the questions being is why I have been able to show my film so widely in the People's Republic of China so far but first let me do a disclaimer. I am not a [indiscernible], I am an expert in the main character in my film who is Zanta, I consider myself a Zantologist. So I've followed her for about three years in making the film and have known her since around 2007, but really, rather than talking about a film, I think you should watch it. Now, unfortunately we can't watch the whole thing, but I've got a three minute trailer that

will give you an idea of some of the issues in it, so without further ado, hopefully we will play it.

[Plays film]

Okay, I hope that makes you want to see it. If not, well, I hope you enjoy the rest of the talk. So, as you can see, it deals with, the film, there's an 83 minute version and a TV hour and it deals with ethnic tensions in Beijing, it deals with gender issues in Zanta's home town and patriarchy where, as the saying goes, 'women aren't worth a penny'. And it deals a little bit with education and the problems for minorities and it, of course, deals with the transformation of people who are essentially, in my view, going from a pre-industrial era lifestyle to a post-industrial life in Beijing, the capital city, in a span of 10 years, which I've observed, again, since around 2007, I've watched the process.

Most of Zanta's community, all of the young people are now either in Beijing or selling, doing street sales of jewellery or various fairs and markets around the country. What you didn't see in the film, which I'm going to mention because it is also one of the reasons I think I'm able to show this or have had a very favourable reaction in China is this is, I was invited to talk before an anthropology conference, I was invited to show at many, many universities and I think one of the reasons why is because I got involved in the story way before I decided, or rather I was encouraged to make a film about it.

Zanta called me up about two years after we met, I'd bought a piece of jewellery with her, thinking, well I know, it's hard to get to meet Tibetans, how do you talk to them, what are they thinking, why are they in Beijing if we hear so many horrible things about ethnic relations? So I bought this piece of jewellery and two years later she calls me, she says, 'We have to meet immediately,' and there she is, on the streets of Beijing, she tries to give me her son who she could no longer support, had no more money and was skinny as a rail. She said he used to be fat and she was afraid he was going to die.

So it's not in my custom to take other people's children and if you have children and you've had enough of them, don't try to give them to me, I don't do that, but I did say I'd offer to help find a school for him, send him to school and that's how the relationship started. It's sort of important that I didn't know this for many years, but she assumed that the reason I was the first person, the first Westerner to ever stoop, to sit with her for about 20 minutes on the sidewalk and talk, was because we were related in a past life and that's rather crucial, I think, to why this film exists and why she tried to give me her child.

So how was it that I came to be able to show it in China? Because I, when I made the film I made it exclusively for a Western audience, I only tested it on Westerners. I didn't think I'd ever be able to show it in China, but then last, less than a year ago, in March, I was invited to a conference on media freedom in Myanmar, of all places and sponsored by the East-West Center and there in the middle you see [indiscernible] who was dispatched by the All China Journalist Association in China, the official Communist Party journalist group to represent them and he gave a talk. I was invited to show my film, so he came to see it and afterward he came up and shook my hand and I said, 'So what did you think?'

He was really the first member of the audience, a Chinese person of some influence to see it, who I didn't know. He basically said, 'Yes, it's a true story,' and I said, 'Yes, and?'

Anyway, the conversation didn't go very far but when we got back to Beijing he invited me to share it at a special training session for about several dozen Xinhua News Agency, the voice of the Communist Party news agency editors and was quite an event. We even had the tea servers that you see in the Great Hall of the People coming around to give us tea and basically he said there were two reasons he wanted it shown.

He said he wants his own reporters to get off their computers and go out and find, give a voice to the voiceless, essentially. Find people whose voices are not heard in society and secondly he said, 'I write about Tibet, I knew nothing of what was in your film,' and that shocked him. And it shocks a lot of Chinese who think that foreigners are outsiders and can never understand anything that what they see in my film is something that they probably, they've never seen elsewhere and likely won't have much access to. I find a real interest in information about what's the life of a Tibetan really like and it's quite different, clearly, from what the propaganda machine says, that we give all this money to the minority areas and they're so unthankful and a lot of Han Chinese have come up to me, PRC Han Chinese and say, 'Look, why don't they like us, what's the issue?'

I think they get a few clues in the film, it's a complex story and it's not a black and white story and it's not good guys versus bad guys, but it is a true story. So far I've shown it at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Anthropology Institute, I've shown it to the, private screening to the chief researcher at the Party School, Communist Party School. I've shown it to a number of universities, a class at Beida, Renmin People's University. It was invited as the inaugural film at the Agricultural University's brand new Centre for Documentary Studies, which opened up last year. There's a real enthusiasm for documentaries and people want to look at social issues that have sort of been kept in the dark. So it's a really exciting, potentially really exciting time in China, you never know, of course, how long these things will be allowed to go on.

So the reaction, I just would like to add that I found a not insignificant amount of resistance to my film in the West. People are afraid of offending China. They see my film as being scary and it's really been quite an eye-opener. There's also been, I think, a bit of political correctness that gets in the way as well, me as a white person going in to film and using the influence or leverage I have, the white privilege I have in Chinese society, which as most of you probably know is quite racist to help, to provide some services for somebody who should have them, but doesn't.

So there's been quite a range of reaction to the film, but much to my surprise, I was expecting mostly, you know, oh, foreigners shouldn't intervene in internal affairs, accusations of ulterior motives, they're working for the State Department or worse, or a defensiveness. And though I have had some of that, it is really not a majority reaction at all. I've been targeting mostly younger audiences and researchers and if I have the opportunity to show it to policy-makers, that would be great too. I wanted to show you some reaction.

[Plays film]

So I think this is one of the reasons why a lot of people are quite interested in the film is because they don't know what's going on and they do want to know what's going on and I found increasing open-mindedness since around 2012 just in general across the board

with the advent of Weibo, micro blogging, now we've got WeChat, Whatsapp types of discussions going on and people are aware that there's a lot more to know than what they see in the official media, of course. So I think this is one of the reasons why there is intense interest. They are shocked, often, by what they see, but the other reasons, there are many reasons but I'm going to go through a few tonight, which I think really caught me by surprise.

[Plays film]

I think the younger Chinese especially are getting quite fed-up with unfairness and they've found out that wealth doesn't really bring you happiness and there's more to life than that. That's sort of my sense on the ground, again I'm just from, I've lived there since 2001 and seen a sort of a sea change going on in terms of attitudes towards life and what's important.

One thing that really surprised me was the Xinhua editor who watched it. I would have thought he was in a privileged position. Okay, their salary may not be the greatest, but you know, still, he watched this film, he said, 'That's me'. I said, 'What?' He said, 'I'm from Dongbei, I'm from the north east and I'm treated as a barbarian because I'm from there and Beijingers have an attitude towards everyone else and so I don't feel welcome here and my son has problems with his ID, getting into schools etc., like that, and he doesn't really fit into the Chinese system. So there's a lot of friction with the teacher, like Yang Qing, the boy in the movie has.' So I find a lot of people identifying with Zanta at a level that I sort of thought that the ethnic issues would have been stronger than that, but no, I think she represents a lot of people.

This was a Peking University High School and this young woman was incredibly impacted by the film and she was so glad to meet Zanta. Zanta came for some Q&As, has started going to question and answer periods and after this she sent me some text messages with these questions. 'What should you do?' 'Who should do it?' These questions I find most interesting that so far they've come up more often with the youngest viewers.

Now granted, this is an elite high school and all that and they're preparing to go overseas, they tend to be more open-minded, but they didn't have any of this, well there was a little bit of, why is a foreigner doing this, but largely people started, well okay, we see there's a problem, what do we do about it, who should do it, is it the government that should take action? Can I as an individual do something? Then they see that I've made a film and a lot of them get really excited about filmmaking saying yes, let's go out there and do it. So I find that very encouraging. Of course it's really difficult to make a film, even if you're not in China.

Anyway, I think one of the other reasons that the film is well received and that it is really an opening to talk about issues which are difficult and are not often brought up is because I'm seeing, in the film you see my engagement with the family and I'm considered a family member and I've sort of cleared that I'm concerned about the child's wellbeing and all of that. So my sense is that, to talk about so-called 'sensitive issues', talk about it from an angle that everyone can identify with, as a mother, as a person who has family member who you want to help get an education.

Then you can start talking about a lot of other issues. As you see that one of the students, this student was at the Ethnic Minorities University when I showed it there and he wrote this to his professor, unbeknownst to him that the professor was going to send it to me and it was going to be heard here. You know, the tendency is, oh, an American making a film about Tibet, red flag, red flag, red flag, this is going to be propaganda, it's going to be anti-China, whatever, whatever, whatever, but that's not the majority view afterwards.

Basically I think it's time to change the conversation and find new ways to open up conversations of issues that are of concern to everybody. In most of my presentations I point out that ethnic issues are a challenge in every country and especially in mine, it may be an advantage. They've all heard about the problems in the US, of racism, of prejudice, of discrimination. And what I found is quite effective and I think what really turned the Xinhua News Agency editor around was when on the plane, after he really wouldn't tell me what he really thought about my film, I said, 'Look, in my country we have huge problems. We started a conversation over half a century ago, we changed some laws, we've made some progress, we still have a lot of progress to make, but you haven't even started a conversation here.'

When I went to the screening there was a young Chinese editor who came up and said, 'Oh my gosh, this is so negative, what can we possibly do and she said [indiscernible] it's up to the government to do this,' and he said, 'No, it's not, it's for every single individual', which we'd also discussed on the airplane on the way back and I thought wow. Later, when I got home that night I said, oh, wait, that's exactly, no wonder I agree with him, that's exactly what I said the other day. I think individuals are ready to question their role in all of this and see that they have, they can play a positive role, if possible.

The other thing which I try to do is say, well, if you want to be... you know, China is increasingly influential in the globe and you want to be interacting, global citizen and all that, there are certain things to understand about how other countries see various issues and in fact, if you can deal with your own issues domestically, dealing with prejudice, unfairness, hierarchical societies etc., you'll probably do better internationally.

We're short on time and I want to leave a lot of time for discussion, but I want to say, my feeling of living in China since 2001 is I feel like right now we're going through the 1960s in the United States where, again, the dream, the American Dream sort of didn't quite deliver everything it was supposed to and people are looking for something more and willing to experiment etc.

While that's going on, I feel quite disturbed that in my own country I've had very well known universities, you know, say they want to look for proposals to do an EMBA project and my film was proposed and we put in a whole proposal because I'd like to help Zanta develop her jewellery business and if possible, come up with a curriculum that could be used in China and possibly elsewhere if I have access to China and elsewhere, if not... I've been asked to do a film course about ethnic minorities in international documentary films, which I think will help raise issues or awareness or create a framework for thinking about prejudice etc.

This very famous school said, 'Oh, Tibet, we might get in trouble with China.' At a film festival, in New York City, very well known. Talked to a friend and said, when I submitted,

you know, I pay my \$50, it's not cheap to make independent films and they said, they called, they asked a friend, said, 'Well, it's about Tibet and we want to have a good relationship with the Shanghai Film Festival, so maybe we better not touch your film.'

I could go on and on and during this trip I've been showing it around 11 places and am scheduled to show at 11 universities mostly in the UK and I've run into some of the people who sponsored it said, yes, some people had doubts and other institutions, I mean obviously the people who backed me didn't. But you know, I think this is of great concern and the political, the other side of this is political correctness, sometimes I'm feeling that the Chinese, the young Chinese I'm dealing with are more open-minded and less put in a box by ideologies, like political correctness.

I think there's a role for political correctness, don't get me wrong, we can have a long discussion on that, that's not the focus of today, but these things also concern me. I feel like China, at least young people in China are moving in the right direction, and I feel like where I come from we're maybe going in the wrong direction. Right, having said that, we can now hopefully talk about more optimistic things. This is Zanta's family of New Year's, when I filmed this, which is 2009, she's back in her village today for New Year's and yes, I hope that you will all have a happy new year as well. So with that, I look forward to your questions.

## Rob Gifford

Great, thank you very much Jocelyn, I'll just pull this over and then before we go to questions, I'm just going to ask Reza to respond from his own experience in Tibet and more broadly, in China, to some of the things Jocelyn said, but also just speak a little bit about your own experience. I know you've been researching education, labour markets, all sorts of things. So 10 minutes from Reza.

## Reza Hasmath

Sure, well let me just start off by saying this is the first time I've seen Jocelyn's clips of her film. What really struck me was really there's a lack meaningful interaction between ethnic minorities in general and Hans and particularly among Tibetans and Hans. So a film like this does a great job of actually showcasing, you know, that sort of inter-experience, but it's not enough. It's an intellectual way of having that meaningful interaction. The reason why meaningful interaction matters a lot is in the labour market side I see it, because meaningful interaction generates trust. You need to have minimum levels of trust to hire Tibetans. In the clip it showed someone was suggesting that Tibetans are not necessarily welcome in the accommodations.

That requires trust. There used to be signs, in the early 2000s, early 1990s when Uyghurs need not apply to a job or Tibetans need not apply to a job and in other jurisdictions obviously there are laws against this. In China there are technically laws against this now, but that's the sort of attitude is that there is a lack of trust between both sides. What's particularly interesting is what images and what sort of interactions are occurring. You know, generally speaking it is through images through state media, so it's a Chinese New Year, so I guess a few hours ago it's technically Chinese New Year now and the Chinese New Year's programmes is an interesting one because it showcases all, I think minorities

and Hans, you have the Han in a suit, the Tibetan, I assure you, is going to be in a traditional costume.

What does that signal? It signals, you know, perhaps, I mean it's good to celebrate different traditions and cultures, but what it signals is that perhaps, you know, minorities or Tibetans in particular are not as developed. If that's your only meaningful interaction with a Tibetan, you're not going to trust them enough to actually hire them.

So, through my research I've, this is not only attuned to China, it's all attuned to other jurisdictions, but through my research in China, I've seen time and again, Tibetans, Uyghurs, particularly minorities, you know, who are multigenerational in Beijing, for instance, facing difficulties getting a job. I'm struck, your story reminds me of a lady, I've been tracking her career since... I guess for a decade now. Her name is Kang, she went to Beida, she went to Beijing University, a third generation, I think, minority Tibetan, living in Beijing.

It's amazing, because she had extreme difficulties obtaining a job and you thought, well, you know, the labour market may not be that great for you, for even Hans or minorities, or Tibetans, but what's particularly interesting was when she did get an interview, employers would ask about her Tibetanness, what's it like living in Tibet? And Kang's never lived at any time in her life in Tibet, she doesn't speak the Tibetan language, she knows very little about the culture, but time and again, there was this curiosity about Tibetanness rather than her as a candidate.

When I did studies looking at trust levels among employers, employers trusted Tibetans and Uyghurs less and you need to have minimal levels of trust to actually employ someone. You're actually more likely to hire someone who is, has less productivity, so to speak, if you trust them more and so an individual such as Kang would have a very difficult time getting that job.

I thought it was really interesting from your film was, there was a line that said, you know, 'My child needs education,' or something to that effect and I'm worried about that because you know, in a city such as Beijing, you know, you actually see that minorities actually have higher levels of education than Hans. This is done through surveys, through NBS, National Bureau of Statistics and through other sorts of statistical sets. You see that the ethnic minorities are actually more educated, but the labour market, they suffer penalties in the labour market insofar that they're not getting the same wages as Hans.

If we had more time I would show you an interesting chart that illustrates this. A lot of my studies have done this, which show, when you factor in education, minorities are not doing as well. So it's interesting, when you ask, when you interview Tibetans, what should I do? Maybe I need more education and that's the answer and when they don't do very well in the labour market, they get even more education, which again, there's a discord there.

Part of that, one of the questions that was asked, what should we do? What should we do about the situation? You know, it all comes back to trust. You need to have meaningful representations; you need to have meaningful interactions with the ethnic minority. Hans



need to interact and Tibetans need to interact in a meaningful way with each other because that's how you actually get that requisite trust.

You might say, what's meaningfulness? Inter-marriage rates, one of the best ways to figure out meaningful interaction because if you have Hans and Tibetans inter-marrying each other, it shows trust. So that's one of the proxies there, but I mean forget that. I mean just the most basic level, there's so many shared experiences that they have with each other, Hans and Tibetans and I think your story was capturing that sort of shared experience that as you were saying, some audience participants were saying, 'I can relate to that,' and that sort of shared experience is the first step in establishing this trust that I'm talking about.

Again, as I said, you know, this comes back in the long run into the labour market where if you have the trust, employers are more likely to hire you. You're not going to see signs saying 'Tibetans need not apply' or 'Tibetans should not stay in this particular accommodation'. Is it a state issue or is it the individual's issue? I think that's a really interesting question to answer. As I said, this occurs in other jurisdictions as well, these sorts of operations, these social operations, but what I think is unique about China is that the state can play a role in having a more responsible image of the ethnic minority.

I mean a few months ago, for instance, you come into Beijing's airport which showcase, you know, China welcomes all the world and you have all the ethnic minorities displayed and they're wearing traditional costumes and so forth. Change that imagery, show the Tibetan wearing a suit for instance of show model Tibetans who are doing well and if that's your only meaningful interaction if you're a Han, with the ethnic minority, that changes your image over time. When you have state run media showing images of the Tibetan always in an impoverished state or wearing traditional costumes, again, if that's your only image that the Han receives of the Tibetan, I think the state can change that sort of operation.

**Rob Gifford**

Or dancing and they eat a lot of grapes.

**Reza Hasmath**

Exactly, so I mean these are interesting ways that the state can play a role, that perhaps China's in a unique place to do so than in other jurisdictions.

**Rob Gifford**

Sorry, I didn't mean to –

**Reza Hasmath**

No worries there. So I mean in the end, I think it is all about fostering meaningful interaction. I think what your film does is one step towards creating that interaction between the audience and your film and you should be congratulated for doing that, thank you.

## Rob Gifford

The Tibetan in a suit, I like that. That should be a sitcom or something, but it's absolutely true, even just the image of that. Tibetan in a suit, hold on a second. The 1960s comparison, I wanted to just pick up on and then we'll open it to the floor. How do you think, Jocelyn, or both of you think that in the light of some of these prejudices, I mean if you look at say Civil Rights in the US, there was a place for bottom-up mobilization and it was ugly and it was brutal sometimes, but it achieved a lot.

How can you do that though, in a country where anything even approaching that, it's almost verging on, nobody can do that and certainly not the minority who come from the place that is a big security risk because they all want independence? Where do you go with that sort of mobilization to in any way, bottom-up push for some greater empowerment for Tibetan people and other minorities?

## Jocelyn Ford

Well, I consider myself a pragmatist and I would say the reason why I'm excited about showing this in China and I have shown it to groups... there were about 12 Tibetan students in one and about 60 or 70 Han Chinese and that was just amazing. It was a platform that they, for the first time, they could start a dialogue, you know, I expected, oftentimes, Tibetans are afraid, of course, to speak, or speak in an environment like that, but that was a start to that. I think starting people thinking is a good place to start. Make them aware of information. I mean basically what I'm saying is that if you don't even know what the problem is, you're never going to solve it. So first, you should be aware.

I see it as a long-term issue. China changes faster than any other country on Earth as far as I'm concerned and the social change has been amazing since my arrival in 2001. I could not have any of these conversations about free expression, free media etc. when I first arrived. I couldn't engage anybody on any of these issues and now I've got these young people clamouring and professors and institutions really interested in taking them up.

## Rob Gifford

So it is possible, you see a real future for the empowerment of minorities in this way?

## Jocelyn Ford

Yes, I think the most important thing is for the Han majority to wake up and smell the coffee. It's a long-term, it's not going to happen tomorrow.

## Rob Gifford

And in some ways the parallel with the white majority, say in the US, really understanding, if you lived in Vermont you didn't know what happened in Alabama and that was a major part of it in the US as well. So let's open it up for questions.