

Transcript: Q&A

Nowhere to Call Home: Ethnic Minorities in China

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Question 1

I've got comments and questions. The young woman in Guangzhou who said this is the first opportunity we've had to understand what Tibetans are thinking. Well up to a point, a friend of mine who used to teach journalism in Delhi tried to get her students who all basically wanted to go on television and were well-off, middle-class Indians, to do stories on how fuel price rises were afflicting the poor and they came back two weeks later, this is Delhi right, and they said, 'We can't find any poor people.'

So you know, there are plenty of opportunities to engage on an individual level with Tibetans. There are Tibetans, certainly all over of Beijing and I'm sure in Guangzhou. So it is this thing about people not seeing the other in that way and I thought that your story about the interview of the job candidate and the assumption that this person was from a very faraway place, it's like us asking a black person here, 'Where do you come from?' when they come from Birmingham. So you see these things echoed all the time.

I wanted to ask you Jocelyn, what you thought about, one of the many things that divides Tibetans in China is, shall we say a divergent understanding of history and after the trauma of 2008, what a lot of liberal Chinese would say was, 'We went to Tibet to help them and they are ungrateful,' and the point of which Tibetans become the enemy within. And that is, again, a remark which wouldn't have been out of place in 1910 talking of Africa, of white colonialist. I think, I wonder if there are limits to this conversation that history remains a no-go area, that there are limits to the personal interactions because of this enormous gulf between how history is understood and how experience is felt in both groups. Sorry, that was a long question, I beg your pardon.

Jocelyn Ford

No, that's excellent. So I've, after screenings, I think the discussion is really incredibly important and in the discussion I have talked about this and one of the very good tools I have, by taking an individual they now identify with, is saying, 'Well, Zanta didn't want me to show this film to Han Chinese, do you know why?' Anybody here want to answer? Why do you think she didn't want to show it to Han Chinese? It's dangerous? Yes, that was my assumption too.

Rob Gifford

Or they'd look down on her, it's a face and you don't want to be pitied.

Jocelyn Ford

That's part of it, but that wasn't the number one reason. She's always surprising me, by the way. No, one more guess? Yes, our mutual language is Chinese, I don't speak her language, it's spoken by very few people, it's called [indiscernible] Tibetan, that's a whole another accent.

She tells a story about her mother, when her mother was a child and the People's Liberation Army came through and they punched out her grandma's teeth in front of her mother who was a small child. Took all their assets and she doesn't have very warm

feelings towards the Han Chinese and then you go to the territory issues and about the disagreement and I'd bring up the issue... I lived in Japan a long time and part of my street credit, I think, in China, is that I played a role.

I was the first foreigner in the prime minister's press core and I raised the issue of comfort women, when nobody had heard about it, essentially, nobody in the press core at least and it wasn't in the headlines. It disturbed Japan's bilateral relations with South Korea, suddenly they had to find evidence that comfort women is sort of sexual slavery, existed during World War II with government backing etc.

So I've got claim to fame, so when I can bring, when I come to the audience and I say, 'Well, you know, I have friends in China who escaped to Northeast Manchuria, under Japanese control from Chinese control when there were warlords out there, because there was good infrastructure, life was orderly, it was safe,' and yet I don't have many Chinese friends today who feel friendly towards the Japanese for bringing all this in. Well, of course they'll say, but it's different, I said, 'Well, maybe the Tibetans don't see it as being different because actually the border has moved back and forth a lot and there's a very complicated history, but you need to put yourself in the shoes of the person who is not happy if you want to figure this out.'

I said this at an anthropology conference of about 200 people and I'm still alive. I don't think, not everybody took to it kindly, of course, but it didn't shut me down yet, maybe it will. I also was recently at a conference in, some of you probably know the Machik organization in Washington, which brings in schools to some Tibetan areas and deals with patriarchy and gender issues as well.

They hosted a conference last November in New York and there were Han Chinese, young students and Tibetan students, all from the PRC who got together and both sides said, 'We've been cheated,' and I knew this on the Chinese side, I said, well yes, the girl went to an American high school and learnt that there was another side to history that she'd never been exposed to and she was quite shocked and upset and was glad to know and the Tibetans said the same thing. They said, 'Before 1959 I thought there was nothing, everything was happy or whatever, with China. We don't know our own history that the government in exile has given one version which isn't as complete.'

I thought it was a very constructive conversation. So yes, I agree with you that it's very important to understand these things, but again, I'm finding much less resistance to talking about them than I had expected.

Reza Hasmath

You know, just to your question more directly, you know income becomes a function of geography. So if I earn \$100 as a Tibetan and a Han earns \$1,000, you're not going to live with the same geography. They don't live in the same geography and they're not going to interact with each other. So when you said that sort of anecdote about the Delhi sort of individual, I mean it's similar globally, but that's why we need to raise incomes. I'm really speaking like an academic because I am an academic, but you really do need to raise the incomes and when you look at the development of Tibet, you're right.

I mean when you look at all indicators, Tibet actually has, you know, more economic development than ever before. Tibetans have higher incomes than ever before, but here is the key part. Tibetans are not comparing their incomes to other Tibetans, they're comparing their incomes to Hans and relative to Hans, they're not doing very well. Particularly for the young generation, this creates a lot of animosity. I think that's problematic and again, really the key idea here is, we want to have a level playing field in terms of income, so they have similar geographies, so they can actually interact meaningfully, so they can generate that trust that I've been talking about, that's so requisite for both sides to actually interact in a peaceful manner.

Jocelyn Ford

If I may just add onto your education issue, I mean the issue, whose education etc., these are all huge issues we're not going to answer in the next 25 minutes –

Rob Gifford

Try.

Jocelyn Ford

Go, no... but I'd just like to put it a little bit in perspective that Zanta has three sisters. They are innumerate, they cannot dial a telephone, so you can imagine, and they don't read, they don't speak much Mandarin, they're in Beijing. They're completely dependent, they've learnt numbers a little bit since, but they were completely dependent on their customers to make change. When they get sick, they need to wait for somebody to call them before they can say, 'Hey, I need a doctor or a hospital.' This is a level of a lack of education which I understand, I don't know what the latest statistics are but something like close to 40 per cent, 50 per cent, whatever, of Tibetans are illiterate.

To me this is a huge, we're not even talking about incomes, we're so far from that. The school in her village, the teacher would come maybe three times a week. So the kids, the saying goes, 'If your parents are illiterate, your children will be illiterate,' because there's nobody to help you and that was sort of true. So we're seeing a divide, an economic divide happening now amongst the Tibetans. Those, of course, who are being paid off, in Zanta's community there's the, I call him the 'one-eyed man', who is on the police dole, he's sent out to control the rest of the Tibetans and he's getting paid handsomely and they suspect he's taking advantage of them etc., so the sort of divide and conquer.

I mean there are a lot of policies that are problematic, but I just want to say that I struggled with [indiscernible] language and Hu's education and Zanta's choice, I said, 'Do you want to send him to a Tibetan school?' and she's always chosen Beijing. That's a longer conversation we don't have time to get into, but basically one of the esteemed Tibetan professors who advised me on this, his view was, any education is better than no education. I think the seriousness, I mean honestly, if people are really concerned about Tibetans, to me, illiteracy would be really high, and healthcare would be really high on the priority list.

I think a lot could potentially be done if done in a... if you can sneak around and find the right way to do it.

Rob Gifford

Of course there's the great irony of, if you want to get on, you have to learn the language of your oppressors that many Tibetans find, but as you say, many people, it seems, seem to have said, what choice have I got? If I want to go up economically I have to learn Chinese, if they have the choice.

Jocelyn Ford

And I think that's a debate that comes up, not infrequently after screenings and I say, you need to hear, ask Tibetans what they want, they need to be included in the conversation. Right now if they speak up they might be arrested, that's the problem and of course the individual doesn't have that much influence on that immediately but I think long-term, just having these discussions, at least it's better than not having them is my view at least.

Question 2

It's partly a comment, partly question and it's based really on, admittedly, very limited experience but we did have several weeks in Xinjiang province back in 2003 when there were not too many foreigners there and we met quite a few Uyghurs. We could have a brief moment about the Uyghurs rather than just on Tibet.

The ones we met were absolutely clear that they were under the oppressive rule of the foreign country, which was China, which had nothing to do with them. They suffered it for 100, 150 years. They did not feel in any way Chinese. They felt threatened. There was then and I believe it still goes on, quite a large number of Han Chinese coming in and actually taking their land; they were being forced into the towns.

Maybe things have changed, but I don't think they have actually. Against that background, where does it leave your comment about the need for more interaction and trust between people? There is no way that they trust the Han Chinese and I just wonder if you're not being a little bit too optimistic about the future and also whether the parallel or the comparison with 1960s United States is really valid because the situation is completely different. In this case you have foreigners who were coming into a land where the Uyghurs already were, you weren't having minorities coming into, coming themselves into a new country and is the case mainly in the US with the exception perhaps of the American Indians and also the case in the UK. So it's not really comparable.

Reza Hasmath

So let me address your latter question, I completely agree with you, I don't think, unfortunately, it's a good comparison between the 1960s Civil Rights movement. It might be a better comparison to my own home country, Canada, from multiculturalism and trying to induce trust. And part of it is, at least from the States' perspective, you do not want to have ethnic mobilization and if ethnic mobilization does occur, it can lead to greater conflict.

To the question on Xinjiang and how it compares to Tibet, I've spent a lot of time in both jurisdictions and what's interesting in both Lhasa and Urumqi: here's Tibetan Lhasa; here's Han Lhasa; here's Uyghur Urumqi and Han Urumqi. They don't interact. It's a different story to ask whether or not Tibet or Xinjiang should be separate, that they're under a foreign power and so forth.

That's a completely different sort of analytical query. If the answer, if the sort of query you're trying to figure out is how do we get them to have integration, how do we get them to live in peaceful co-existence with each other? The story is, they need to generate trust. The story is, they need to have meaningful interaction and what's really alarming, what we can draw from Xinjiang and Tibet is, you know, when you have less and less interaction, coupled with lack of institutional access, so when there's low socioeconomic scores, when there's low income, one side versus the other, coupled with the fact that both sides don't have representation in the political process or political institutions, it leads to a rise of ethnic conflict, potential ethnic conflict.

That's why potentially in Xinjiang we are seeing a rise of flash ethnic violence. It's a result of that lack of institutional access, it's the result of, you know, disparate incomes between both sides. In Tibet, interestingly enough, we're seeing a similar situation. So it is, again, if the question is, how should the Party, how should the state try to manage potential ethnic conflicts? They need to address the socioeconomic aspects to ensure that both Tibetans and Uyghurs have better incomes, particularly the young cohorts. If we had more time we'd be talking about the rise of ethno-religious consciousness in Xinjiang where you see the young people, they're educated, but they're not getting the jobs that they were trained at, compared to Hans.

What happens, the young cohort particularly, they re-learn their ethnicity. In other words they become more fundamental in their ethnicity and particularly for Uyghurs, there might be a religious element which creates, or there is one but I'm trying to be politically correct here, because not all Uyghurs are actually Muslims or Islamic, but in the end it creates greater tensions and so the state has to actually address this within the sort of construct, that if a pragmatist were to construct.

Rob Gifford

Can we put the Uyghurs in with the Tibetans, I mean obviously the violence we saw in 2008 in anti-Han violence in Lhasa and then 2009 anti-Han violence in Urumqi, in Xinjiang, they are often put together. But since then there's been much more of an explosion from the Uyghurs, especially the killings in Kunming, but it seems like every week there's some police station is attacked in Xinjiang. Do you see them, as you were filming this, do you sort of see them in the same way?

Jocelyn Ford

First of all I think, this room probably is, hardly need to say this but Tibet is an incredibly diverse area with maybe 50 languages spoken, little pockets all here and there. I don't think we can talk about one Tibetan. I've only looked at one small community, which is also an outlier, they've come to Beijing, most of them. Most Tibetans live outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region in the other provinces and oftentimes they're ignored in all

of this, but back to the violence, the self-immolations. I mean it's a different form. I've seen in my own community that I've been observing is increasing criminality, disenfranchisement. It's quite serious and this is another thing which I talk to the young Han Chinese about is that this is the future of your society.

If you don't deal with this, if you don't even start to understand it, you're going to have a bigger problem on your hands. I think I created a little misunderstanding about what I was referring to in the 1960s, I was not referring to the Civil Rights Movement, I was referring to the unhappiness among young Han Chinese, that wealth, that ideal life didn't bring them happiness. They've grown up with enough and now they're looking for something more, so I'm not equating that with the Civil Rights. I do think it does, it's not to say that it won't at some stage lead to that sort of thinking. I think that's why I'm able to talk about this film, which I never would have been able to do or even make in 2001, so I don't know if that clarifies it.

Question 3

Thank you, I'd like to ask a question about cross border influences because obviously Tibet is on a very contentious border, Xinjiang is obviously on a, you know, there's a lot of cross border movement and so on. In your experience, completely hypothetical, there might not be any influence at all, but is that a factor in the way that these minorities feel towards the Han and the Han feel towards them, I presume, but also within the way that they are actually treated in these areas?

Reza Hasmath

In my experience, you know, when you see ethnic violence occurring, using the States has its foreign influences. Anecdotally, from my own experience, I don't see it and you know, for me it's more of a home-grown issue. It's simply a function that, you know, it's the most basic thing. Just forget ethnicity for a moment. Individuals just, families just want a better life for themselves and if they are comparing themselves to Hans who are coming into Tibet or Hans coming into Xinjiang, then they find that those Hans are doing much better than they are, it creates resentment. So I would not, I would be very hesitant to say there's any foreign influences.

If I was to say there are any influences, it may come from the Tibet overseas community or the Uyghur congress overseas, but again, within Tibet, or within Xinjiang, they play very little role in influencing their everyday life or even policies.

Jocelyn Ford

I would say the Tibetan exile community is very, from what I understand, is very out of touch with what life is like for Tibetans inside of Tibet and it's a whole different conversation. That's another reason why I made the film because this is the life that these people are living today and her concern is getting the kid, you know, she lost her first child, no medical help, her sisters all lost children, people die of unknown reasons.

We're talking about really basic survival things, basics of life and the politics is not, she's not an overtly political person but yes, she also thought they lived in the centre of the

universe until she went to Beijing, was shocked, didn't know there were tall buildings, didn't know there was a train, didn't know any of this and then they said, 'Well yes, what have you guys been doing? You didn't give us good schools, you didn't give us the same sort of conversation that you just described.'

Rob Gifford

I think the external influence, if I can just add a sentence or two, is much more a question for the Uyghurs than it is for the Tibetans because they're mainly Muslim, but then the answer is actually, they're not as much part of the global Islamic thing that's going on. I mean there were some Uyghurs who were captured in northern Afghanistan, sent to Guantanamo, who are now in Albania, are they? Or Tonga, or somewhere.

But I think that dynamic is actually one of the most interesting because I mean I know there's reports of Saudi money coming in to build mosques and things, but by and large, the Muslim anger, of one of the few places where there is Muslim anger, it's not directed at the West because the West, and the minute you go there, I mean as soon as you go there, anyone who has been there knows that as a reporter, I'm sure Jocelyn had the same, you're sort of approached in the bizarre, you're seen as a friend.

I went there after 9/11 actually and was going around the bazaar in Urumqi, and I literally, it was kind of, okay, how am I going to find someone. So I thought, well, you know, might as well, so I just walked along the little nut stores and said, 'Anybody want to talk to me about China and Muslim issues and how you see the Chinese and what this is all about?' First guy said, 'No way', second stall, the guy said, 'Wait here, I get my cousin.' You know, there's an automatic... and then I travelled around the whole of Xinjiang with that guy, literally on trust, that he knew, you know, I was reporting objectively about the situation, but his immediate assumption was that I was sort of on his side, the West is on their side against China.

In terms of the sort of Muslim brotherhood across the boundaries, much less. I mean it's Sufi Islam, a lot of it is Sufi Islam, there's not the same kind of bond and they're out of the cauldron of Israel and the Middle East and the Palestinians. There is no doubt, there is some kind of bond and then you get that link that people get radicalized and then they do want to tap into the global.

My knowledge of Tibet is probably not as great on this issue, but they are not sort of tapped into some bigger, global thing and indeed I think the feeling in Tibet now is that they've sort of largely been forsaken by anyone outside because China is so important. China has influence through whatever means, the Confucius Institutes, for all the good linguistic things they do, the very sort of subliminal influence that this and Chinese media influence can have on what can be discussed abroad.

Jocelyn Ford

Which I ran into on this tour, but having said that, I am also pleased, I don't know if I just mentioned this in this conversation that the first trans-Pacific ticket from Beijing to the US to show my film is sponsored by Confucius Institute.

Rob Gifford

In the US?

Jocelyn Ford

In the US, in New Mexico on the border, okay, get this, because they have a lot of students from Mexico and they think they'll identify with the film.

Rob Gifford

That's weird.

Jocelyn Ford

And the first paid screening I had was with Xinhua News Agency, so there is, and this is where the conversation should be, it should be within the PRC borders and so the fact that, you know, if the interest in the West is falling off, I think that's a bad thing, but if interest in China is increasing, at least to certain people, that's even more important.

Question 4

I am a Tibetan who happens to be in a suit.

Rob Gifford

Fantastic.

Question 4

First of all I would like to thank Jocelyn for this very unique and wonderful documentary and I agree with you that people should consider Tibet to be a sensitive issue, from various governments, political leaders, they should speak the truth, that's it. Because at the moment the Tibetan people, we are no longer demanding separation from China and we are neither anti-Chinese nor anti-China. And I had personal experience of having met literally hundreds of Chinese students, scholars, journalists, including a couple of intelligent people, you know. When I meet them face to face, many of them have never met any Tibetan.

I start by saying how I being a Tibetan am not able to live in my own country, how I lost my parents at the age of four or five because of Chinese invasion. If China had not invaded Tibet, my parents would still be alive and how I got a good education in India and giving an example, I also got Fulbright Scholarship to study in the United States. Especially since 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, it's become very easy for the Tibetans to interact openly with the Chinese people, especially the younger generation.

They are very open-minded and as some of the families did point out, you know, they also feel cheated, how ignorant they have been all along. Some of the Chinese, even scholars, I bet in the United States, even here in London, they said when they were growing up they

were led to believe that the Tibetans, they are suffering, they are living like beggars and then to see us Tibetans equally educated, they were quite surprised.

Many of the Chinese people even told me that when we go back to China we are going to spread the message of the Tibetan people who are Chinese family members, friends, relatives etc.

Rob Gifford

Are you based here in London and do you have contact with relatives in Tibet?

Question 4

Yes, I have some relatives in Tibet, but it's quite difficult, you know.

Rob Gifford

Are you hearing, what stories are you hearing of change there at all or not?

Question 4

Some of the changes could be a little bit positive, but what is most important is, you know, the general freedom is lacking. People in Tibet, they get arrested for having a photo of the Dalai Lama and the tragedy of the whole situation in this present world, you know, weight is given to moral values because one could easily argue with the Chinese that Tibet, you can say it's no longer a political issue, it's a human issue.

But many world leaders, including British politicians, they don't have the courage to speak out the truth. We have seen like political leaders, they refuse to do anything to help Tibetan people or even meet the Dalai Lama. When they are no longer in power, they queue up to meet the Dalai Lama. So this is the tragedy, but they queue up to meet the Chinese leaders.

My question was, so the most important thing is how do we overturn this tragedy of international political leaders, you know, having the moral courage, not to bow down to the Chinese pressure? I mean that's the key issue because the issue of Tibet is quite easy to be resolved. Even the Chinese people told me, what is the problem? I said the problem is your leadership, who are interested in only keeping power and not telling the truth to the people. Once the Chinese people know the truth, we have no problem understanding each other, and the situation becomes all the more worse because international leaders, they bow down to Chinese pressure.

Now you know, in South Africa, they work so hard to get the freedom, but they refuse to give a visa to the Dalai Lama because of pressure from China.

Rob Gifford

So Jocelyn, international and internationally, how do you see the Tibetan issue developing?

Jocelyn Ford

I was told I couldn't make a film, I was told I couldn't show it in China. Yes, I might suffer, you know, at the end of the day, just do it, if you believe in it. I agree that most, many countries are dropping their principles at the airport when they arrive in China or before they get to the airport now, they're dropping it in their own countries and I think that's a huge problem. I mean students are told not to study Tibetan minority issues because you, you know, and I understand there are real issues, you may not get access and you may have no future career and this all is very insidious and having a long-term impact.

I mean a number of the Chinese scholars as well, they looked at my film and said, 'You know, we really want to do that, but of course we couldn't get published,' and therefore no lifeblood and I had to make this film on my own money, essentially, because nobody wants to support something like this.

Reza Hasmath

This is an extremely difficult question to ask because, and to respond, it comes down to values and norms, that's what it comes down to and when you said, you can't [indiscernible] the Dalai Lama, that's true. You cannot practice, any public official, for instance, cannot practice any religion and so it's equal across border, it's not even an ethnic issue, it's just that's the country itself and that's what the Party believes. So, I mean what we have here is a disentanglement between ethnicity, which has religion attached to it and so this is a wider issue that may not only be a Tibetan issue.

How should states react to it? Again, it's up to the individual state and whether or not they believe economic gains can come at the cost of, you know, rights, but mind you, do bear in mind, not all human rights, I can't believe I'm about to say this, are universal. There is a capacity to have different rights within the construct of your own society and equally, imagine if there were rights that were Chinese or China imposed here, we would be affronted and it's the same sort of affront that occurs in other direction as well.

So I don't want to speak for all sinologists or academics, again, I feel like I have that hat on right now, but I think it's just understanding that you want to work within the confines of your society and if that's the values and norms that the society practices, you need to respect that. I mean it goes again my own values and my own individual norms, but it is a society. I don't feel it's my responsibility to say it's wrong, because I don't have, it's just not my place to say so.

Rob Gifford

Can I, sorry, to say at 7:12 that human rights are not universal... Just quickly, one more question that I wanted to ask you about education, because I know you've been sort of tracking some of that. Do you see more Tibetans getting better educated, and Uyghurs, as they say, I am opting in here, there is no future in going to a Uyghur school or a Tibetan school, I'm going to get a PhD and enter the labour market.

Reza Hasmath

So I am lucky enough that I am able to access the National Bureau of Statistics ethnicity stats, the most recent ones. It's not publicly available but when you do look at that statistics and the surveys that we also collect, Tibetans and Uyghurs, particularly young ones, are better educated than ever before. Now, I really want to stress, it's not only getting an education, because education plays this small of a role in getting a job. You know, that's where you need to have trust, you need to fit into the working culture, you need to have confidence and those are the other aspects that we need to really talk about when it comes to converting your education to a job in the labour market.

You need networks, particularly for high status, high paying jobs, you need to have good networks. One of the reasons, if you look at Xinjiang, you look at Tibet, that Hans are getting different jobs than Uyghurs and Tibetans is that Hans have different networks than Tibetans and Uyghurs. So, in spite of having a good education, the young cohorts, they don't have the benefit of the same networks to get that job opening, to get that sort of position.

Rob Gifford

Jocelyn, final word to you, any more brief, very brief questions you'd like to throw at Jocelyn? Final word to you, come on, summarize where –

Jocelyn Ford

Hey, we live in a globalized world. Let's all be global citizens and just take people as individuals who also have traits of their ethnic background, but let's stop looking at the walls and start looking at the similarities instead.

Rob Gifford

But if you're a Tibetan [indiscernible] from outside Beijing, are you more prejudiced against than you are if you're from Manchuria or from Hunan or Henan, are the problems that you face much greater?

Jocelyn Ford

Much greater but probably not as great as the Uyghurs. The Tibetans at least have a fast track to heaven, according to a lot of Han Chinese, they've got down the karma cycle there and so if you follow their Buddhism you might get to where you want to go eventually whereas, unfortunately, I don't think that holds true for the Islamic religion.

Rob Gifford

We can't get into that kind of theological discussion.

Jocelyn Ford

I'm not saying that they don't get... I'm saying that the Han Chinese, they don't feel that. I'm not saying that's, so therefore the Tibetans have something that's admired and wanted and valued and I'm afraid that in my interactions with ordinary Han Chinese, they don't see that from the traditions that the –

Rob Gifford

From the Uyghurs.

Jocelyn Ford

Not that they don't have it.

Rob Gifford

And you're getting Han Chinese going to Tibet and going to the ashram or whatever, the equivalent to sort of go and seek enlightenment. Fascinating. Thank you very much indeed to Reza and especially to Jocelyn for sharing your thoughts and the clip of your film. We'll all go off and see it now and good luck with that. A round of applause for the panel.