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By Timothy B. Weston

The US media rarely covers the regular people who are living in the areas of China with large ethnic minorities. In chatting with a Han Chinese student (Han Chinese are by far the largest ethnic group in China) at the University of Colorado named Leong, I was struck by his nuanced perspective on his experiences growing up in Xinjiang, a province in western China with large populations of Hui (ethnically Chinese Muslims), Uighers (Turkic Muslims), and other ethnic minorities. Given the recent discussions in the Western media—in light of the situation in Tibet—of Chinese policies toward ethnic minorities, I thought China Beat’s readers might be interested to hear from Leong.

(Timothy B. Weston conducted this interview with Leong on April 23, 2008.)

Timothy B. Weston: Please explain who you are and where you grew up and when?

Leong: I was born in Urumqi to Han parents. I grew up in Urumqi and lived there for 18 years in a neighborhood of kids from different ethnic groups, such as Uighurs, Hui, Tajiks, Kirghiz, Kazaks and Han. My school was ethnically integrated. Though most students were Han, there also many Uighurs and Kazaks and even more Hui. There were two kinds of schools in Xinjiang when I was growing up — one kind had students of all ethnic backgrounds and the language of instruction was Chinese. There were also special schools for ethnic minorities where instruction was in their native language. Otherwise the curriculum was the same. It was up to the parents where to send their kids. More ethnic students went to special schools where there were no Han Chinese and instruction was in their native languages. Recently the Xinjiang government combined the two types of schools together, so the teachers have to learn the other languages. According to the old model, when the students took exams to enter the next level of school they took different tests and answered different questions depending on who they were. Now all the questions are the same. Han Chinese kids never have to learn ethnic languages. There was no serious tension or self-segregation among students when I was a student. That is because all students speak Chinese and share the same culture and talk about similar subjects. When I was a student at a mixed school virtually all teachers were Han, though there were also a few Hui teachers, but none were Uighurs or Kazaks because they don’t speak Chinese. The mother tongue of the Hui people is Chinese.
TW: Was your parents’ generation equally integrated with the other ethnic groups?

Leong: It was even more integrated than in my generation. My parents had a very close Kazak friend. My parents felt equally friendly toward all ethnic groups. Some Han Chinese were very biased, however. I lived in a mixed area of the city, where people regularly interacted with others from different ethnic groups. Some who live in more exclusively Han areas display bias toward other ethnic groups. I did not understand the difference between myself and other ethnic groups until I was 5 or 6 years old. I only knew their faces were different. In festivals they would dress distinctively, but otherwise we all dressed the same way.

TW: How are ethnic relations changing as some in Xinjiang are becoming more wealthy?

Leong: From the perspective of the market economy, now that there is a free market there are definitely some groups that are more talented, shrewd and able to take advantage of the new opportunities. In villages this is less true. Some who have become wealthier are traveling more to the Central and Western Asia for business and are exposed to Islamic fundamentalist ideas and as a result are becoming more fundamentalist. These people, when they come back to Xinjiang, sometimes propagate fundamentalist ideas such as the idea of a Holy War against the infidels and in favor of an independent East Turkestan state. Their immediate goal is an East Turkestan Islamic state. But so far there has not been a survey that indicates how much influence those radical ideas and are having in China. I do not personally know anyone who has become a fundamentalist.

TW: To what extent are members of other ethnic groups in Xinjiang trying to move inland, to other parts of China?
Leong: It’s a general trend that with a booming economy people want to move to more prosperous areas to make money, and many succeed. But that number is smaller than the number who travel to Central or Western Asia, where the ethnic groups are more similar and thus easier to navigate. Many who travel to Central and Western Asia are not radicalized. Only some are radicalized. I have a Uighur high school classmate whose father did business in Western Asia but showed no signs of fundamentalism.

TW: In your entire life in Xinjiang you never personally encountered any separatists?

Leong: No, never. It’s my sense that these radical ideas are not dominant among ethnic people. Another reason might be because it is very dangerous to discuss these ideas in public. In this sense, it’s consistent with the general political atmosphere in China. Of course, I did encounter racial discrimination and was at times taunted by students by other ethnicities because Hans eat pork and are not Muslims and are viewed as infidels. I was robbed many times by older kids from other ethnic groups when I was growing up. They picked on me because I am Han. But all ethnic groups have bad people. Generally, in the U.S. life is peaceful but we cannot deny that there are crimes and racism here, too. In every society, there are some people who are not satisfied with the status quo, who are discontent with others. For me, the taunts and robberies do not change the larger reality that the different ethnic groups mostly live together peacefully in Xinjiang.

TW: Are you still in contact with friends from your childhood and if so which types of people?

Leong: I call my friends in Xinjiang several times a month. I call them because they are my friends, not because they are of any specific ethnic groups. Some of the people I call are Uighurs.

TW: As someone who grew up in that environment, do you think you think differently about the recent troubles in Tibet?

Leong: Yes, definitely. The experience of living in Xinjiang, where there are other ethnic groups, leads me to understand that there are some problems with the Chinese government’s policies toward minority ethnic groups. I tend to think that some Tibetans are truly unhappy. In the free market economy local officials are more powerful and have much more leeway over the implementation of policies set by the central government and frequently they carry out polices that benefit themselves, which means they may distort or ignore the central government’s preferential polices toward ethnic minorities.

TW: How do you respond to the outpouring of Chinese nationalism in reaction to criticism of China’s Tibet policy from outside China?

Leong: First of all, I think it’s understandable because the claim from some Tibetan exiles is that Tibet should be separated from the People’s Republic of China. When we study Chinese history we know how much Chinese sacrificed to hold the country together. I understand the Han response to the separatist movement in Tibet. But I also think the extreme nationalist reaction is dangerous because it has resulted in a lost chance for all Chinese people to examine what is going wrong with ethnic policies. The outpouring of nationalism focused too much attention on
patriotism and away from the very real problems at hand. There’s been too much focus on the separatist threat and bias in the Western media. Many Chinese people think about this the way I do but do not want to speak out because they are afraid of being labeled traitors, which comes in handy for those stupid so-called “patriots.”

**TW:** What do you think of Beijing’s handling of the recent ethnic conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang?

**Leong:** I think as a political party that is ruling over a modern and in some respects a post-modern country like China, the Chinese government’s tactics and actions are reminiscent of those used by nineteenth century political actors. They do not understand how to communicate with the rest of the world in a way the rest of the world can understand. They show little knowledge of public relations. I think there are many good things going on in the ethnic regions, such as preferential policies, but why does the rest of the world know so little about this? And why does the rest of the world have such a bad view of what China does in these areas? The public relations is terrible and stupid—for example, the recent decision to kick foreign journalist out of Tibet. As someone from Xinjiang, I mostly have no criticisms of the Chinese government’s current polices in the ethnic regions. Generally, the ethnic groups really do benefit more than the Han. On college entrance exams the ethnic groups are given preferential treatment, and they do not have to submit to family planning policy. They have their own TV programs in their own languages. The Han are actually the minority in Tibet and Xinjiang, in a numerical sense. I disagree with Western media accounts that report that Han Chinese are pouring into Tibet. Unlike Tibet, Xinjiang is rich in natural resources and business opportunities, and not located at a high altitude; it’s more comfortable for Han Chinese, so more Han come to Xinjiang than to Tibet. But at the same time, many first or second generation (after the founding of People’s Republic of China) Han Chinese left Xinjiang because they were disappointed by the policies and quality of life there, which is due to the huge gap between the western region and the eastern coast. This has been under reported.

**TW:** How do you feel about Xinjiang as your home?

**Leong:** I love Xinjiang, its culture and its people (regardless of ethnicity). It is my home.