

# Encountering the Other: Literature about Minorities in China

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In the 1980s and 1990s, as fundamental changes were taking place in Chinese society as a result of economic reforms, Root-seeking, a popular literary movement, brought distant realms, both temporal and spatial, into Chinese literary expression. Its attempt was to find spiritual as well as artistic inspiration to counter-balance the trends toward commercialization and westernization. For a while, it was all the rage to write about the isolated rural areas where modernity had not made inroads. The more adventurous writers looked beyond the countryside of the Chinese interior to the borderlands inhabited by minorities whose cultures differ dramatically from the Chinese. Leading the trend was Wang Meng, whose Yili stories about the Uighurs and Kazaks captured the exoticism of Xinjiang. Other writers included Zhang Chengzhi, Ma Yuan, Ma Jian, Ge Fei, Ma Lihua, and many more.

In my modern Chinese literature courses, I have included these writers and their works, not only for their artistic value but also for their unique perspectives on the culture of minorities as well as their views of mainstream Chinese society. While Ma Yuan and Ge Fei might be better innovators with the art of fiction writing, Zhang Chengzhi and Ma Lihua tend to cause the most heated discussions among students, for they have distinctive and even controversial views with regard to the minorities they portray.

This paper focuses on Zhang's writings about the Jahriyas, a sub-sect of Islamic Sufism, that is largely concentrated in Gansu and Ninxia, and Ma Lihua's travelogues of Tibet. I will explore in particular the ways in which these two authors' encounters with minority groups connect with their own spiritual journeys within the context of contemporary Chinese cultural and intellectual life.

Zhang Chengzhi was born in Beijing in 1948 in a Muslim family. He went to Inner Mongolia in the 1960s as an educated youth. After the Cultural Revolution, Zhang studied archeology and took many trips to the northwest. This

background forms what he calls "the three continents" that support his life and work: the yellow loess where the Hui people live, the grassland of Inner Mongolia, and the Turkic civilization of Xinjiang. His first publications were stories about his experience living among the Mongolian herdsmen. From the grassland, Zhang Chengzhi moved to writing about Xinjiang where he did field work while employed by the archaeology department of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This venture finally led him to his meet spiritual *duosidani* (friends): the Hui and Salar Muslims, particularly the Jahriyas. Although Zhang Chengzhi's writings about Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang take up a significant portion of his literary output, it is the Jahriyas that truly touch his soul.

The Jahriya live in the poorest areas of China's northwest, a region to which Zhang returned repeatedly from 1984 to 1990. He shared a single tattered quilt with the peasants and ate watery soup from the same bowl of the villagers. Unlike the green grassland of Inner Mongolia, here Zhang found the scenery strikingly barren and the people deeply religious. Confronted by the Jahriyas' history of oppression and rebellion, Zhang found his calling: to be the pen for the Jahriyas. He tells us that *History of the Soul*, though penned by him, belongs to the Jahriyas, who will guard it with their lives, if necessary. This seemingly self-aggrandizing proclamation, however, has a certain truth to it. A fellow writer confirmed that he once randomly picked out a Hui peasant woman and asked her whether she had heard of Zhang Chengzhi. "Yes, he is the man who writes for us Hui," she promptly responded. "Have you read his books?" the writer asked, "No, I cannot read"

(<http://book.people.com.cn/gb/paper19/11/class001900002/hwz81657.htm>). Zhang Chengzhi would have been enormously gratified to hear that an illiterate woman living in the backwaters of the northwest recognized his name.

In Zhang Chengzhi's view, the world is divided into two cultural spheres: the religious and the secular. While the Han Chinese tradition is definitely secular, the Jahriyas tradition is decisively religious. In this dichotomy between the pragmatic and the spiritual, between the temporal and the eternal, Zhang chooses to stand firmly behind the latter. His disdain for the "culture of Confucius and Mencius" is apparent throughout his work *History of the Soul*. He situates the repeated uprisings of the Jahriyas against the Qing not just within the history of one small

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minority people against the hegemony of the imperial court, but also within the struggle of one particular way of life against another. The Jahriyas he meets today, and especially the stories of their martyrs he has heard, lead him to reject not only the materialism of current Chinese life, but also the very foundation of Chinese culture.

For China to overcome its lack of soul, Zhang Chengzhi points out, it needs the resilient spirit as represented by the Jahriyas. On the other hand, he is quick to add, "Holy Teacher Ma Mingxin and his Jahriya shine with such radiant splendor, precisely because they are in China, a country without belief, a country where secular thought and theory dominate everything" (Zhang, p. 75). In that sense, the Jahriyas, defined by their willingness to die for the sake of their faith, "need" the Chinese material world to manifest themselves. Just as the brutal suppression by the Qing only intensified

the Jahriyas' rebellion, the spiritual vacuum of China provides a fertile soil for the Jahriya's spiritualism to thrive. The Jahriyas thus represent the spiritual side of the **totality** of Chinese culture, and do not merely exist as a separate entity. By using himself as an example, he places the emphasis on the importance of the Jahriya to China: just as Zhang Chengzhi, a man who has been raised in Han Chinese culture, has embraced the heroic narrative of Jahriya martyrs, the rest of China can also use it as a roadmap for the journey to spirituality. He implores his readers:

Early in the morning, I hear – my readers, I hope you also hear – in China there is a voice gradually emerging. It is becoming clear and gaining vigor. This is the voice of the soul. From a melody simple and unsophisticated, by degrees it becomes an intense, uncontrollable passion. It repeatedly questions this abstruse universe and human existence; it repeatedly believes and affirms. Around the time when the first rays of the sun appear in the horizon, around the time when the gray dawn of the east quietly colors the window lattice, that voice becomes a sonorous vow. It shocks the movement of time; it is resolute and decisive, powerful and mournful. (Zhang, p. 31)

In this poetic description of the spiritual voice lies the meaning of existence and the power of transformation. Zhang urges the Chinese people to embrace what the Jahriyas represent, if not the Jahriyas themselves.

It is important to note that this Jahriya voice is the voice of the “unsophisticated,” the voice of the poor, the voice of the rural peasant from the barren yellow loess of the northwest, for whom Zhang Chengzhi wishes to be a powerful champion:

The word “poor” in China is a perpetual vocabulary. Those dim memories of poverty - the total devastation seen all over the country, the shabbiness of household after household, of village after village – caused me to continuously search. I doggedly insist that everybody in China should remember the poor, remember the destitute people. (Zhang, p. 22)

It is one thing to sing praises of the underprivileged; it is quite another to extol violent rebellion against power, or to elevate religious faith above everything else. Zhang Chengzhi no doubt is walking on a precarious line and he is very much aware of the danger in writing such an emotionally charged narrative. Mindful of the fate of his model writer, Guanli Ye, a Jahriya imam in the late Qing who recorded his people's history in Persian and Arabic languages illegible to the authorities, Zhang Chengzhi muses, “Perhaps my painstaking effort of writing could only be a hand-copied book, be among the kindred spirits of a few friends, silently circulated. (Zhang, p. 301).

*History of the Soul*, once published, has not only reached more than “a few friends,” but millions of readers, mostly non-Muslim Chinese readers. Although the book was briefly banned in Xinjiang and Ningxia, up to this point, Zhang has not faced any persecution from the government. For although he extols the rebellious spirit of the Jahriyas, the target of the armed uprisings he describes is the Qing court, not the current Communist government. However, as history is often used as a lesson for the present, there is always the shadow of threat when one speaks the forbidden truth, even if the truth is couched in metaphors and symbols. Zhang Chengzhi reserves his most vehement criticism for the Confucian historiographers who defend the Qing at the expense of the Jahriyas, questioning how a person who does not believe in the existence of the soul could represent a people with such a strong religious belief. In doing so, he essentially asserts his own legitimacy in speaking for the Jahriyas. As if anticipating his detractors, Zhang repeatedly affirms his complete identification with the Jahriyas' cause and their religious faith. Being a Hui himself no doubt has made it easier to tear down the wall that separates a privileged Beijing writer from impoverished peasants in the northwest. In the process of writing about the other, he becomes the other, if only in a spiritual sense.

Like Zhang Chengzhi, Ma Lihua belongs to, in her own words, “the last generation of Chinese romantic poets.” Born and educated in Shandong Province, she went to Tibet in 1976 as a college graduate and spent a total of 21 years working there. Her writings, mostly travel literature and reportages, present a

complex picture of Tibet in all its contradictions. Ma's writings are particularly eye opening for our students who are familiar with the views of Tibet represented by Dalai Lama's exile government and its western sympathizers as well as books written by early European travelers to Tibet. While Ma Lihua is Han Chinese and in some ways shares the Chinese government's position on Tibet, she is also an individual who has earned the respect from many Tibetans within China. To encourage debate and discussion and to help the students develop their own critical thinking, it is important to include writers such as Alexandra David-Neel (*My Journey to Lhasa*), James Hilton (*The Lost Horizon*), Tsewang Pemba (*Idols on the Path*), Dalai Lama (*My Land and My People*), and Heinrich Harrer (*Seven Years in Tibet*).

Luree Miller has written an excellent introduction to western representation of the Himalayas, in which she laments, “Tibetan civilization as it has evolved for the past thousand years has been destroyed by the Chinese. Secret Tibet no longer exists.” (Miller, p. 98). Ma Lihua's writings tell us that traditional Tibet, though rapidly changing, is still very much alive, depending on where one looks. Before the Chinese government opened the region for economic development and tourism, Tibet largely remained inaccessible to the outside. Foreigners were not allowed to step inside it and Chinese, though free to travel to Tibet, were discouraged by the lack of easy access to modern transportation. Tibet was thus shrouded in mystery, subject to outside speculation. In the late 1970s, the Chinese government began to recruit college graduates to go to Tibet to serve as teachers, technical experts, doctors, cadres, and administrators. Many of these youths were aspiring writers and artists who were interested in chasing their own dreams while working for the government. Through their writings and their art, Tibet enters the Chinese consciousness with a new image. Up to this point, Tibet, in the minds of the Chinese, had been a medieval, backward society, a view no doubt created by the Communist propaganda machine to legitimize “liberating” Tibet in the 1950s from the shackles of feudalism. Half a century later, Tibet acquired a new image, reinvented mostly by these young, romantic artists

and writers. They came to discover a new Tibet, one that was associated with mysticism, the spirit, the soul, the meaning of life. This new perception of Tibet was very likely influenced by the vision held in the West that regards the old Tibet as an idyllic paradise, the spiritual backyard of humanity, the last oasis of mankind. In the past, Tibet had cast its spell on western travelers; the same magic now beckoned the Chinese youth. One of Ma Lihua's colleagues, Ma Yuan, a fiction writer, offers this testimony: "Before thirty, I had a big dream- to be a writer. When I turned thirty, exactly one year after my arrival in Tibet, I realized that my dream was becoming reality." (Ma Yuan, p. 1)

Ma Lihua came to Tibet dreaming the same dream, enveloped by the same aura. Unlike Zhang Chengzhi's barren yellow loess, Tibet, with its stunning and diverse landscape and its rich religious and cultural traditions, holds a powerful appeal to its visitors. Upon arrival in Tibet, Ma Lihua was immediately captivated. A starry-eyed poet in love with the land and its people, she saw "nothing but beauty" around her:

No one called on me; I came to the grassland myself.

It was a fresh green season that still had snow and storms,  
Majestic mornings and brilliant dusks,  
And the rustlings of tiny flowers that plucked the string of my heart.

The grassland is a star-studded sky.

When dark blue fades, bright green glistens.

The herdsmen are the nature that can sing.

We are the nature that can write poetry.

No matter how much suffering there is,

We will fill it with poetics.

Forever romantic, that is in all of us.

(<http://club.sohu.com/read-yihuo.2352-0-0.html>)

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*She was in awe of the expansive natural beauty; she admired the Tibetans for their endurance and strength. Her belief in cultural relativism allowed her to regard the nomadic families living in the harsh environment of northern Tibet as occupiers of a corner of the earth on behalf of humanity, the last warriors who refused to retreat from the ancestral land (Ma, p.118).*

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While Zhang Chengzhi found religious faith in extreme poverty and hardship, Ma Lihua mainly saw "beauty in suffering" (Ma, p. 8). She would later remark that her vision of the land at this poetic phase was pre-conceived and it had little to do with the reality. Later as she learned the Tibetan language, though never getting to the point where she was fluent, assimilated to some extent to Tibetan culture, and most importantly traversed the diverse land of the region, Ma Lihua became in some small measure a "Tibetan." She now found herself in an ambiguous position of being neither an outsider nor an insider. As an outsider, one could take one of the two positions: a passionate admirer or an objective observer. She had been both. As an insider, one would likely have no trouble understanding the esoteric practices that made the devout resign to fate, an aspect of Tibetan culture Ma Lihua came to question, though ever so cautiously. In *The Soul Is like Wind*, she explains the change in her, "If I had left Tibet after writing *Glimpses of Northern Tibet*... if I had not gone deep into the rural communities... if I had not seen the loss in the eyes of worshippers in Zantang Village... if I had not met the pilgrims prostrating on snow and ice ... if I had not known the monks and nuns in Qingpu and Dezhong ... I would have kept in my memory only the beautiful Tibet." (Ma, p. 698-99). She is pained by the conditions of their existence and the high cost they pay in exchange for a promise of a better afterlife. She has trouble accepting this way of life, although she understands the importance of religion: Sure, the belief in the soul and afterlife

has its rightful place, just like heaven in Christianity and Islam.

But it is worrisome and it gives me many sleepless nights that the belief in the soul and afterlife has so profoundly affected a whole region and a whole people, shaping a whole society, generation after generation.

Who has benefited from this?

The ordinary people should have lived a better life.

Life is such a great and precious gift from the creator. We have only one life. Even if there is afterlife, we should treat this one as the only one given to us. (Ma, p. 695)

While my students believe the sincerity and good intention of Ma's, they are not sympathetic to her view of Tibetan Buddhism. Here the comparison with Zhang Chengzhi is especially meaningful. Like Zhang, Ma has found that most religions exist among the most economically deprived. While Zhang is troubled by the extreme poverty among the Huis and Salars, their unshakable spirituality has left a much stronger impression on him. He never attempts to attribute poverty to religious belief; quite the contrary, he believes that adversity helps strengthen Jahriyas' faith in God, for the only hope and comfort for the destitute and downtrodden lies in the afterlife. Ma Lihua's humanistic impulses, on the other hand, lead her to question the impact of religion in the economic conditions of a community. The deeper she travels into Tibet, the less she is sure of her ability to understand its most devout believers. Perhaps Zhang Chengzhi is right when he questions how an atheist can truly understand the soul of a religious people.

At one point in her travels, Ma Lihua maintains the position of a cultural relativist and insists on observing and describing, not judging. The more "Tibetan" she becomes, the more hesitant she is to remain impartial. She is no longer able to treat Tibetan Buddhism as purely an academic interest, for "[it] has evolved in my mind into a series of, familiar names and faces, some unforgettable scenes of life." (Ma, p. 694) Although she holds Buddhism in the highest esteem, for it is "the most tolerant religion I know of." (Ma, p. 694), she is acutely aware of an

unbridgeable gap with the pious pilgrims and she finds it impossible to enter their spiritual interior. She admits that her understanding of Tibetan Buddhism is limited. However, judging from her book *The Soul Is like Wind*, we can see that she does have a rather solid grasp of Tibetan Buddhism, knowing much more than the average Buddhist.

What she lacks is not intellectual understanding, which she undoubtedly possesses, but faith. She does not accept fate and believes religion is for the weak who need the comfort of hope. (Ma, p. 704) On the other hand, she marvels at the serenity found on the faces of those who are most religious, such as the elderly pilgrims she and her television crew follows for two months. For them and others, such as the ascetic nuns and monks, who have given up on all pursuits of material comforts in this life in order to secure a better place after death, she feels enormous admiration but also pain. "What if afterlife does not exist? Would they then have missed too much?" she ponders (p. 675). She finds herself caught in a deep paradox. She is excited to discover an old village, "a living fossil, a corner far removed from modern civilization" (p. 701); she is saddened to witness the difficulties members confront in their daily lives. Moreover, the dilemma is painfully personal. She wishes to be a scholar, standing from a distance to observe and describe Tibet, but her feelings and emotions get in the way; she wants to remain a poet, filled with excitement and passion, continuing to sing praises of the beauty of Tibet, but she has seen too much and is no longer able to turn suffering into aesthetics.

Aware of the traps of modernity and appreciative of age-old traditions, Ma Lihua nevertheless comes down on the side of "progress." All she wants, she writes, "is for my fellow human beings on the Tibetan Plateau ... to enjoy all the achievements of civilization of the mankind. Only when Tibetan traditions are appreciated under such conditions could I rid myself off the feeling of guilt and the risk of losing the sense of justice and conscience of a writer from Tibet." (p. 700).

However, when Tibet becomes another Guangdong, will Tibet be the

same Tibet? The answer is no. What would the solution be for such a dilemma? Ma Lihua has no answer. Her ambivalence is evident as she concludes *The Soul Is like Wind*, calling it a book that has not found "its anchor," for the changes that have taken place within her are not "fixed" (Ma, p. 705). In other words, the quest and questioning will go on and she will most likely continue to oscillate between her appreciation for traditional values, including Tibetan Buddhism, and her desire for modernity. What is troubling, though, is that Ma Lihua shows no trace of acknowledgement that the "project of progress" is inextricably associated with the Chinese government's effort to consolidate Tibet into the nation-state of People's Republic of China, a controversial undertaking.

In the end, she admits that Tibet has changed her, turning her into a contemplative person, but she has not changed Tibet. Who is she to that land, she asks herself, "a poet on the road who delayed her departure time and again and whose enthusiasm lingered too long? A nosy traveler who liked to poke into other people's secrets of life? An obsessed pilgrim who threw herself wholeheartedly into the journey but refused to be enlightened?" (Preface to *Zouguo Xizang*, p. 1)

In comparison, Zhang Chengzhi's world is much simpler, filled with fewer ambiguities. He faces no ambivalence toward the people he writes about. He shares not only their values but also their religious fervor. Coming from the Muslim

background may have something to do with it, but more importantly, what the Jahriyas represent coincides with Zhang Cheng's conviction in moral absolutism, and his persistent crusade against banality. Lacking Zhang Chengzhi's certitude, Ma Lihua appears the more familiar of the two. Her good intentions might sometimes be misplaced, but they are as sincere as are Zhang's. Zhang Chengzhi leaves no room to doubt his right and his ability to speak for the Jahriyas—he has been given a license to do so. Aware of her limitations, Ma Lihua

not only admits her inability to penetrate the Tibetan mind but also expresses doubts about her own feelings. Zhang Chengzhi wishes to restructure a civilization; Ma Lihua is much more modest: she wants to take us to the scenes she visited, presenting us with all their complexities, leaving it to us to make a moral judgment. Her Tibet is not a single abstraction; it is an ecologically and culturally diverse place. There is no one single Tibetan culture that can be summarized by a simple definition. Traditionalists and modernists share the same space; ascetic lamas and disco dancers compete for our attention; Chinese cadres and Tibetan Communist Party leaders tend to the same people in need of help. Her Tibet is a Tibet seen from the views of a Chinese woman, a person who has lived there for twenty-one years, a Chinese who has gone to all its corners, but has only scratched its surface. The most valuable lesson we can learn from Ma Lihua is that it is not possible to experience the totality of Tibet by one person or in one book. The conception of Tibet must be individually defined. One must acquire a critical eye that casts doubt on all forms of signification, including one's own, particularly when one deals with the subject of the soul. Ma Lihua has shown us, through her own example, how important and challenging it is to do so.

Although they represent different perspectives, Zhang Chengzhi and Ma Lihua bring to contemporary Chinese society a badly needed dose of medicine through their writings on cross-cultural experiences. In his encounter with the Jahriyas, what Zhang Chengzhi has found is, in his view, an answer that addresses the lack of spirituality in Chinese life; in her interactions with the Tibetans, Ma Lihua has discovered for her readers

a group of souls that possess such eternity, a tribe that has erased all limits and individual consciousness... [They] do not need a surname, not to mention the continuation of a family line and the accumulation of wealth. [They] do not know competition and what it entails: worries, anxieties, loss, confusion, misery, crisis, and despondence ... [They] worship nature; they treat all forms of life equally; they are not aware of their own

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poverty; they have kindness and sympathy for all people in the world, no matter how much wealthier they may be. (Ma, p. 693)

Where are they? They are not in Lhasa, not in the villages and towns that have been exposed to modernity. They are certainly not in the Chinese interior. They are in the places where light is still provided by a butter lamp and a cooking pot is still made with tools used in the Neolithic Age. They are in Zanyu or Zantang, in the Xuerong valley or other similar places in rural Tibet. To the increasingly commercialized and secular Chinese who live in modern cities, the Jahriyas and the Tibetans provide a mirror through which they can look into their own souls, even if it is for a fleeting moment.

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## Un-Othering Minorities in Chinese History

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For this paper I explore the ways in which I integrate minorities into my courses on Chinese History. For me this is a work in progress, and I am always searching for additional opportunities in which to move toward "un-othering" minorities.

I accomplish the integration of minorities into my courses with varying degrees of success. The two introductory-level courses I teach, Early and Modern East Asian History (divided at 1600) include the study of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Given the inherent survey nature of these courses, I have much less opportunity to integrate the study of minorities into the curriculum than in my upper level courses, Early China and Modern China. At the other extreme, I have also taught a senior-level seminar on ethnicity and race in Qing China. In addition, I incorporate discussions of gender issues in all of my classes and I am pleased that these efforts occasionally dovetail nicely with the discussions about minority groups. In this paper I will concentrate on how minorities are treated in my survey courses. While I include much social and cultural history in all of my courses, for the purpose of this talk, I will be concentrating on political history. Since much of the "othering" of minorities throughout Chinese history resulted from the military and political subjugation of those groups, it follows that one way to pursue an "un-othering" of minorities is to demonstrate that at various times, they too had military and political clout.

For all of my courses, I begin with discussions of what is/was "China"? As we

all know, the boundaries of what is referred to as "China" were constantly in flux. Here we can see an example of how current reality impacts upon how we think about history. Traditionally, most courses on China have focused on the core area within the current borders of the People's Republic of China (the area dominated by the ethnic group labeled "Han"). Thus, the histories of Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang or Manchuria are usually only touched upon when those areas were under the political control of a government centered within "Inner China" or "China Proper." In this context I show the students a series of maps demarcating the boundaries of several of the dynasties of China, demonstrating the difficulty of defining a particular physical space as "China" throughout history. In addition, I also ask the students to regularly question how much control the center really had at the edges of its empire. I like to use the term "empire" since it implies the conquering of one group by another. So, along those lines, I also ask them to keep observing the differences among people living within the borders.

Some of the difficulties that we encounter when trying to integrate minorities into courses on Chinese history derive from the historical realities of the marginalization of minorities in the People's Republic of China as well as the lasting influences of Han nationalism. Han

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nationalism, which emerged in China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has, until quite recently, dominated interpretations of Chinese history that prioritize the importance of Han dominated dynasties and endorse the "sinicization" hypothesis for non-Han dynasties. The "sinicization" hypothesis builds upon the assumption that non-Han peoples wanted to rule China because they were attracted to China by a superior Han culture. In addition, according to this theory, the success or longevity of a particular non-Han dynasty was directly related to how sinicized it became.

I introduce this model as a practical lesson in historiography, getting the students to think about how modern views can have an impact upon the interpretation of the past. I begin the late Neolithic period