Fertility and Identity: Muslims in Xinjiang

With the end of the reign of the Manchus who governed the Chinese Empire for three centuries, and with the advent of the Republic (1911), the minority issue took on a new dimension in 19th-century China. Aware of the fragility of national cohesion in this immense land of heterogeneous population groups, Sun Yatsen, founder of the Republic, publically minimized the influence of minorities, affirming the supremacy of the Han, the majority ethnic group and founders of one of the first Chinese dynasties. The Chinese rulers quickly became a focus of debate. Proclaiming that, of a population total of 400 million inhabitants at the time, the minorities represented 55% of the population, the Chinese sought to avoid aggravating the political and strategic contention – China conceded substantial privileges to the frontier minorities in demographic terms. Indeed, parallel to this population policy the Chinese birth control policy, more tolerant towards its minorities than towards the Han, played an incontestable role in widening the gaps in fertility. But that is not the only reason. Although many Sunni Muslims are critical towards birth control, the high fertility rates of the people of Xinjiang are not imputable to a religious factor alone: we have seen that Islam did not by any means impede the fertile transition of the Hui, themselves Sunni Muslims. However, the high fertility of the Turkic speaking population, which naturally translates into a more abundant population, seems to force the centripetal inclination. It is indeed disconcerting that their fertility is far superior to that of their cousins in the ex-Soviet republics (Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, etc.) and is even greater than any other Turkic speaking area in the world, where fertility has fallen to a level below those of developing countries. The example of the Hui demonstrates very well that the stricto sensu religious factor actually has little influence on the process of transition in fertility rates. Furthermore, it leads one to conclude that the atypical behaviours of the Xinjiang Muslims entail another dimension, which could well be political.

High fertility to affirm identity?

Following the example of other minority groups aspiring, if not to autonomy, than at least to obtaining greater recognition, the Turkic speaking Muslims of Xinjiang seem to have found, in this high fertility, a means to affirm their ethnic identity and to reinstate their resistance against the Han. The Hui, who are spread across the territory in a rather homogenous fashion, who are today strongly sized and have never had their own territory, greatly differ from the Uygurs, Kazakhs and Kirghizes, who have cultivated a strong sense of identity – bound to their geographic concentration in their own territories where they hold the majority – which has given rise to ethnic, cultural, and even separatist claims. Xinjiang (the former front) has only been part of China since 1759, when it was conquered by the Manchu dynasty. From then until 1949, only ten generations went by, during which period the Han population increased at a rate of seven times, becoming a homogeneous people that the Chinese considered in the light of the collective memory of a people, and their sinization is but superficial. For a long time, speaking peoples had their sights set on places of ‘high civilization’: those being Isfahan in Iran or Bukhara, rather than Peking. During this period, the links with the central powers remained very loose, to such an extent that on several occasions Xinjiang was turned into a precious asset in the eyes of the Mongol army in the 16th century. The Chinese, who were under siege in the Tianshan mountains, then became should the installations of Han immigration.

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