BREAKING THE SILENCE

AN HRIC INTERVIEW WITH SARA DAVIS

A few years after graduating from college, Sara Davis went backpacking in China to pursue a long-held interest in folk performances and storytelling. She found, however, that folk storytellers were much less common than she had anticipated. It was only in Chengdu that she located some back-alley storytellers, who further whetted her appetite for studying this ancient art. She decided to return to graduate school at University of Pennsylvania to study oral storytelling and folk performance, and spent two years in Sipsongpanna, Yunnan Province researching the vibrant storytelling tradition of the Tai minority group. It is from this experience that her book, *Song & Silence: Ethnic Revival on China's Southwest Borders,* is drawn.

China Rights Forum (CRF): A strong sense of cultural loss comes across in your book. Do you find this is typical of minorities throughout China?

Sara Davis (Davis): I think everybody in China, not just the minorities but the Han as well, has experienced similar losses. Modernization is happening so rapidly, and there have been so many cataclysmic changes. The Cultural Revolution was the biggest and the worst of these, with an active attempt to eradicate the old cultural forms. Some of the bitterness I hear among ethnic minorities is, "We didn't start this, it wasn't our idea to get rid of the old stuff, and now that we want to recover it, we aren't supported!" In some areas, there's a younger generation coming up that's interested in exploring their ethnic identity, but they have nowhere to go except for those ethnic theme parks that everyone despises. If you're an ethnic minority around 25 years old who wants to learn about your culture, there are very limited resources and very limited government support for your culture. This neglect is a source of sadness, and sometimes of anger.

CRF: Is revival of traditional culture regarded as a challenge to authority?

Davis: I think we have to be careful not to speak too monolithically of the authorities. There are many ethnic minorities in officialdom, some of whom support eradicating ethnic culture, who want to modernize and throw away what's old and replace it with better and new stuff. So there's a lot of conflict and debate within many ethnic regions about what it is to be a minority, what should be saved and what should not be saved, as I describe in my book. It's not just that minorities are passive and officials are oppressing them—there's a lot of debate going back and forth at many different levels in society.

CRF: Do you see any of this debate on Web sites, where people are able to express these ideas and go back and forth on them?

Davis: With few exceptions, most minority people I know don't have great Web access. They don't have computers, they don't have technological know-how, and they have trouble getting Internet accounts. Some of that is politically controlled, and some of it is due to poverty and the lack of education and resources. When they do get online, it's often hard to find appropriate scripts for ethnic languages that require them. So there's not much happening on the Web. There is starting to be some activism among the Manchurians, I believe, but less in southwest China.

So most of these discussions happen in more traditional spaces, like temples, villages and universities. Universities in minority regions have a lot of what we have here in the U.S. among Asian-American and African-American youth groups. They have ethnic minority groups that give performances for each other to show what they find out about their own culture. You're starting to see this in some of the universities in minority regions, such as a Tai youth association that organizes song and dance evenings, lectures and so on. These kinds of events are especially common in the southwest, where the environment is more liberal and less restricted.

CRF: What other special challenges do ethnic minorities face in China?

Davis: There are a lot of challenges. One of the things that strikes me the most, as a person from a working-class background who used education as a way to move out of her environment, is the lack of access to education. I see really miserable school systems in minority regions—under-funded, under-staffed—and the school fees are extremely burdensome for minority families. That shuts down many opportunities. Young ethnic people not only lack history and culture in their own languages, but they also don't learn to speak Chinese fluently enough to get good jobs and access to higher education. This especially impacts girls in a disastrous way that has yet to be documented.

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The lack of educational opportunities leads in turn to many other problems, especially lack of access to good-paying jobs. In tourist areas that have been built up by the state as an effort to develop minority regions, my impression is that minorities tend to be in low positions, working as janitors and maids and security staff, while the desk jobs and tour guide positions go to Hans from urban areas who are educated and can speak standard Mandarin without an accent and be understood by tourists, or who have the training to be accountants or do management tasks. This is a classic tourism development pattern all over the world, even in the U.S.—the evidence is overwhelming that unless there's a big effort to keep things in local control, the people who benefit from mass tourism are usually people who come from larger cities.

Ethnic minority regions tend to suffer a lot in this respect; if you're in a good position and have *guanxi*—networks—then you can profit, but if you don't have a good education and you're just a guy from the villages, you get locked out, and this creates resentment sometimes. There's a kind of colonial relationship that the coastal regions have with the minority regions and other inland regions, in which resources are extracted, and the local regions are kept under control for the profit of the coastal areas.

Of course, the area where minorities are really locked out is government. At the local county or township levels, you may see strong minority representation by people who would have been leaders in the pre-"liberation" system—and there's also more female representation than in the past in minority regions. When you get up into the regional level, there's still quite a bit of minority representation. But as soon as you get to the central or national level, it drops right off. So there can be strong representation at the local level, but they don't really have any say. Local officials can be shut down or fired, or things can be changed around by fiat from Beijing.

CRF: Did you see any attempts to change this situation while you were in Yunnan, or did people feel it was hopeless?

Davis: Oh, I think people are very much trying to push for as much space as they can get from within. In Burma, where I have also spent much less time, my impression is of general despair. In China I don't have that feeling, and I think that people who are involved in politics in minority regions are really involved, they're absolutely operators. They're trying to marshal as much power as they can; they're trying to find spaces for action, and they're pushing the limits.

One of the most interesting meetings I had when I was with Human Rights Watch was with a group of minority leaders in Beijing who were very interested in hearing about human rights and how it might apply to them. They asked some of the toughest questions I've ever had to answer about economic and social rights versus civil and political rights. These were very sharp political people. They were articulate about the fact that they were trying to find space within the Chinese system to use it for the good of their communities—as well as for their own good, just like politicians anywhere.

CRF: Is there much perception among ethnic minorities that some of their concerns are common to some Han groups, or to other ethnic groups? Do they ever form coalitions where they can work together on issues?

Davis: That happens a lot. Some pan-ethnic cooperation is fostered by the government—for instance, the government will say, we need a representative of each ethnic group to form a committee to oversee such-and-such a cultural project. The government does this all the time, so people are quite used to it. However, one of the biggest challenges I see my colleagues among China's ethnic minorities struggle with is the same problem we struggle with here—getting away from racism and ethnocentrism and all the stereotypes that have built up over the years. There's a lot of racial and ethnic stereotyping in China, about groups within China and outside of China, and apart from occasional platitudes there's never been a genuine and aggressive effort by the state to address racism and ethnocentrism in the country. This problem is most serious at the very grass roots level, among villagers. There are still race riots and ethnic riots in China over resources and land—they're just not reported in the news media.

Another major concern is gender. Gender dynamics within minority groups are complicated, and have only become more so with Chinese modernization and development. Minority women in China have to deal with the traditional gender relations from the past, which may sometimes be oppressive, combined with the contradictory messages put out since 1949 by the central Chinese government. Women in ethnic minorities, already hampered by poorer education opportunities, are trying to negotiate how to be like a modern Chinese woman and still demonstrate solidarity with their ethnic group through another set of behavioral standards that sometimes involves deferring to men.

CRF: The concerns of Tibetans, Mongols and Uyghurs are becoming more well-known overseas, but this seems to be

much less the case for other minorities in China. What are the main reasons for this?

Davis: One of the core problems that all of these minority groups face is language rights. Here in the States we think it's enriching to learn your traditional language, or to learn to write Chinese if you're Chinese-American. But for minorities in China it's also a matter of survival. They need to have their own language, because in many regions where education is so poor, most minorities don't speak Chinese. So if they're arrested and taken into court, they have to have a translator, and in many cases courts don't provide them. Police abuse is already rampant in any rural area, but it gets even worse when you're in a region when you don't even speak the same language as the police, and when you get into court and you don't have a translator, and you may have signed a confession you can't even read, you're in serious difficulties. So we have to understand language rights as intimately tied to civil and political rights. Freedom of expression, freedom of association, right to information, due process—these are all meaningless if you don't have language rights and resources to support the use of minority languages.

Unfortunately, these problems tend to be overlooked because, again, of poor educational opportunities. We haven't had many visible minority spokespeople to communicate with the international community from the border regions. That doesn't mean they don't have eloquent leaders who could move us all to action; it just means they can't speak English, or Chinese, and they don't know there are people out here who want to hear them.

Another part of the problem is what Perry Link refers to with the metaphor of the anaconda in the chandelier,[1] which has had a big effect on western scholars of minority regions in China—anthropologists, sociologist, folklorists from the West, especially the U.S., who are super-sensitive about not stepping on any toes or getting anyone in trouble. As a result, many, in my opinion, tend to temporize the bleak conditions in these regions, and have shied away from confronting human rights problems, because they're afraid of losing access and they're afraid of getting their colleagues in China in trouble—justifiably. When you put this timidity on the part of anthropologists together with the lack of access to an international platform by minority leaders in China, you wind up with a great silence. We really need anthropologists to go and work in China who are willing to confront the legal realities and the human rights issues, not just in Tibet and Xinjiang and Mongolia, but also in Guizhou and Guangxi and Sichuan and other areas.

CRF: Do Han Chinese who are interested in "progressive" issues seem to be focusing on issues involving ethnic minorities?

Davis: I hear young people talk about Tibetans—there's a certain romance about Tibet everywhere, including in China—but I haven't heard much about other regions. There tends to be a sense that other minority regions are just as they're portrayed in the government media, sort of sweet and naïve and passive and decorative, and there isn't a sense of a real opportunity to do productive activism there. But there are so few people who are progressive and engaged in the first place in China, and they've got so many other issues like AIDS, petitioners and all the rest of it, that they have their hands full already.

CRF: What kinds of things should or can the international community do to help minority peoples?

Davis: We need a whole new generation of really gutsy young language-learning researchers, Chinese and foreigners, to go out to ethnic regions, gain an understanding of the realities on the ground and tell us about them. The field is wide open. I think it's possible for academics to study human rights issues if they take basic security precautions and are not rash. We also need to actively support ethnic leaders from these regions to come out and talk to us—academics, students and low-level officials.

People in the human rights world tend to think of officials as anti-human rights, but actually, it's a big system, and there are plenty of good guys in there who are just biding their time and waiting for a chance to be heard. We need to encourage those folks to come out. There are regional and county-level and township-level officials who are genuinely concerned about their communities. We need to open more doors for those people internationally.

We also need a whole generation of tech-savvy people to go to minority regions and set up and maintain computer and Internet systems for them. It would be great if some of the people involved in "hacktivism" overseas could go over to China and set up some workshops. It's always possible to write something in words the government will approve of, and get something under the radar.

There are Southeast Asian and Australian researchers doing interesting work in Yunnan, collecting old manuscripts in minority languages. And UNESCO has been doing a really great project where they're training young monks and other community people to fix up old temples in ways that are consistent with architectural history. It could become an important model for the rest of the country—there aren't too many places with old buildings left in China.

NOTE

1. Link uses the analogy in reference to the subtle intimidation through which the Chinese government imposes self-censorship on writers and scholars inside China and overseas. See Perry Link, "The Anaconda in the Chandelier," *China Rights Forum* No. 2, 2002, http://iso.hrichina.org/public/contents/article?revision%5fid=4276&item%5fid=4275.